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Morris et al.

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- (54) **FOLD OUT RAMP**
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- (*) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this
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U.S.C. 154(b) by 8 days.

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B60P 1/431; B60P 1/4421; B60P 1/435;
B60P 1/6454; B60P 1/4442; B66F 7/243;
B66F 7/24; B65G 69/2823; B65G 69/2811;
B65G 69/28; B61D 13/00; B61D 47/00
USPC 414/812, 537, 540, 546, 921; 14/69.5,
14/71.1, 71.3; 296/61; 105/436
See application file for complete search history.

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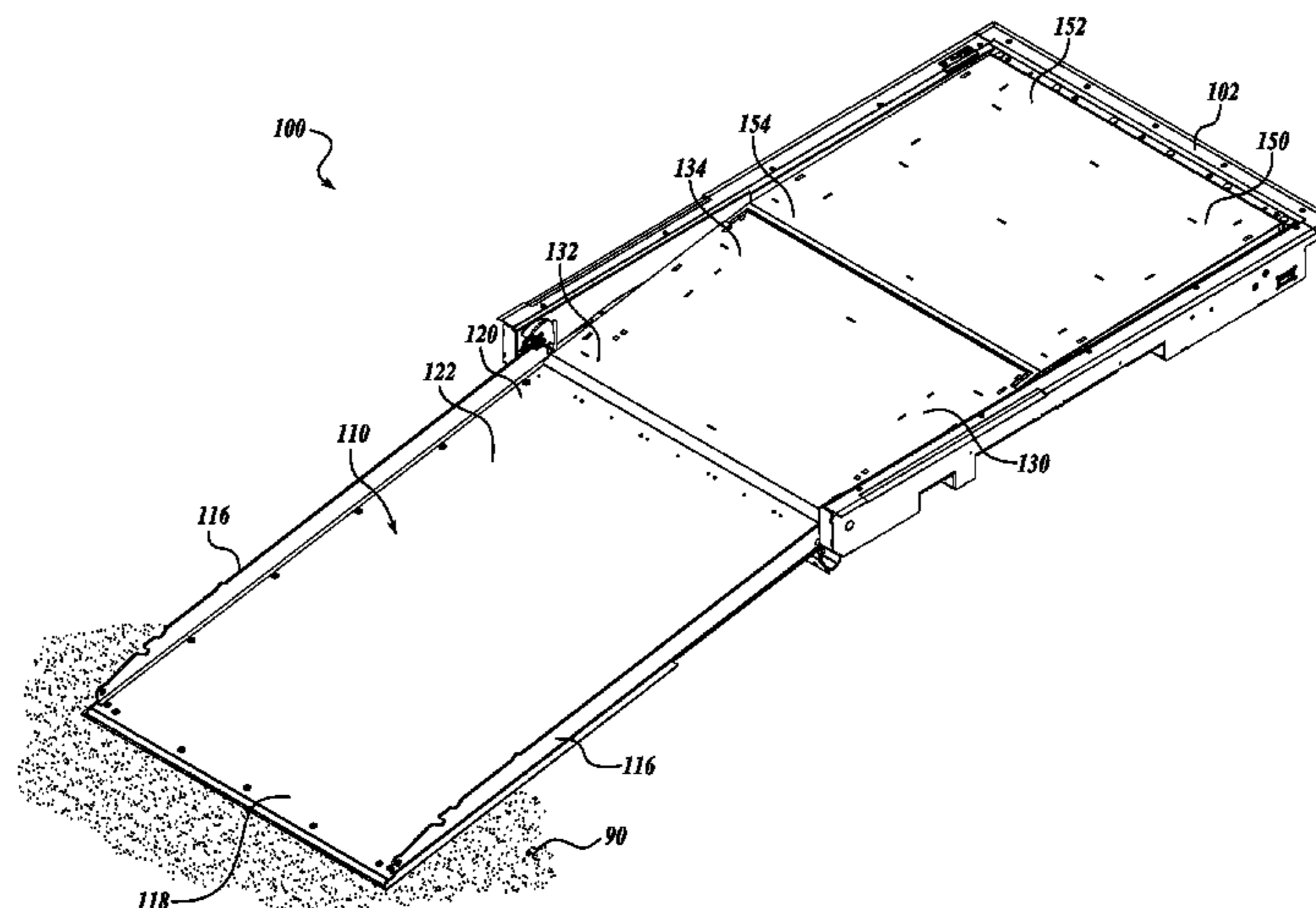
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A ramp assembly provides a transition surface between a vehicle floor and an alighting surface. The ramp assembly is moveable between a stowed position, a first deployed position, and a second deployed position. The ramp assembly includes a ramp portion coupled for rotational movement and a panel rotatable about a first end. The ramp portion supportingly engages a second end of the panel to elevate the second end of the panel as the ramp portion moves toward the second deployed position. A method of deploying the ramp portion includes the step of rotating the ramp portion until the ramp portion contacts the alighting surface. The method further includes the steps of rotating the ramp portion until the ramp assembly reaches the first deployed position, in which the ramp portion forms a predetermined angle with the panel, and selectively rotating the ramp portion to the second deployment position.

19 Claims, 15 Drawing Sheets



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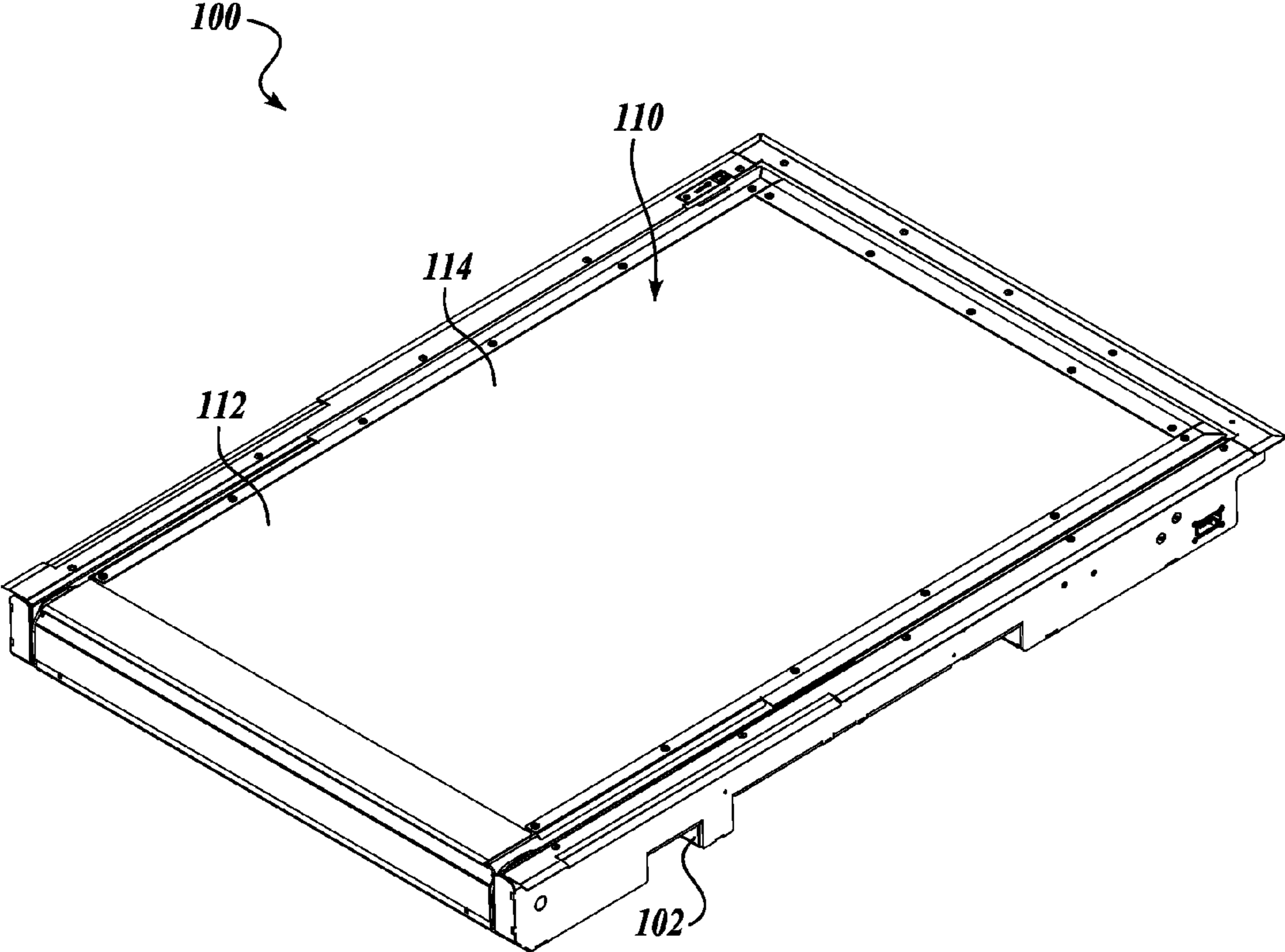


Fig. 1.

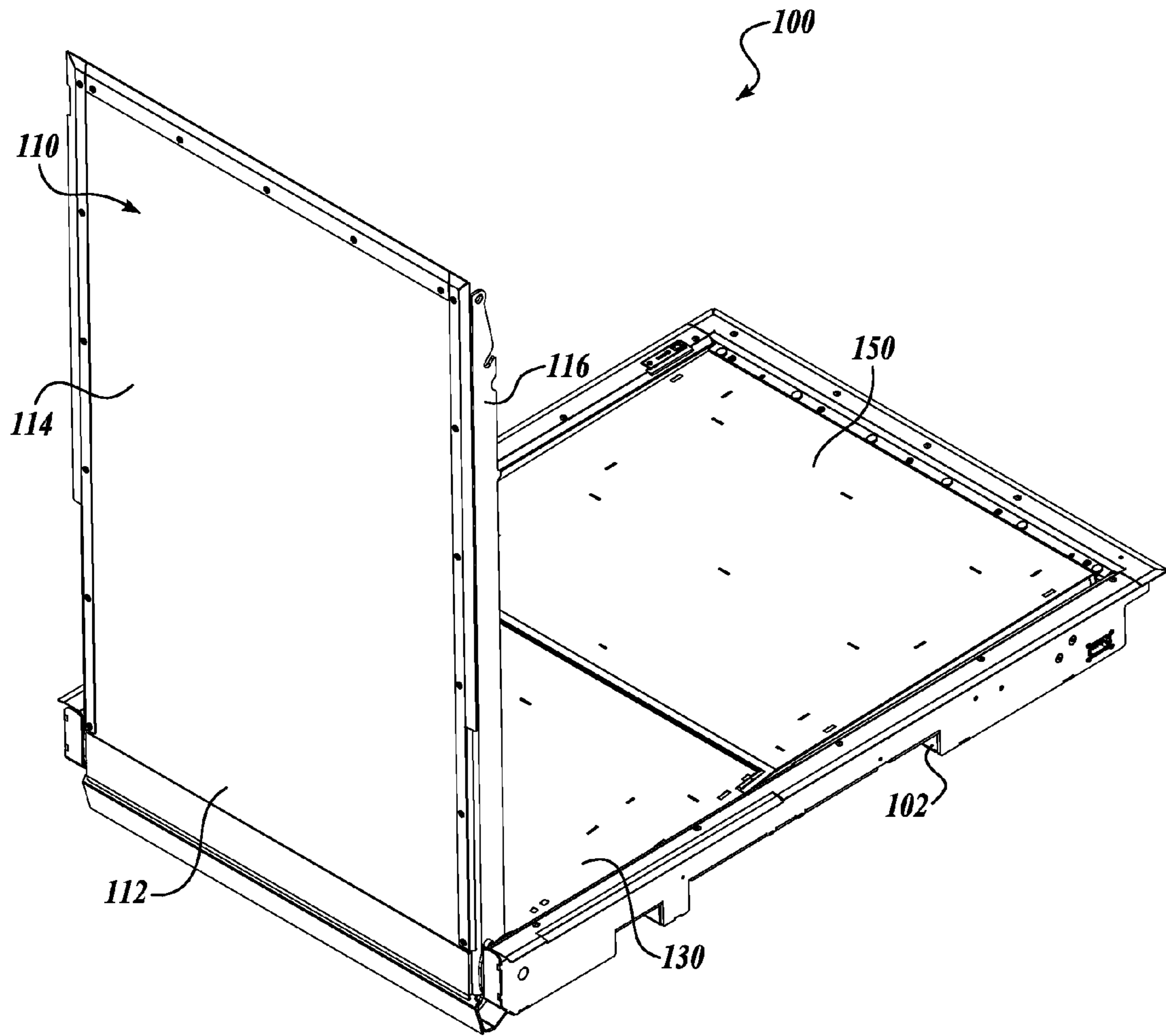
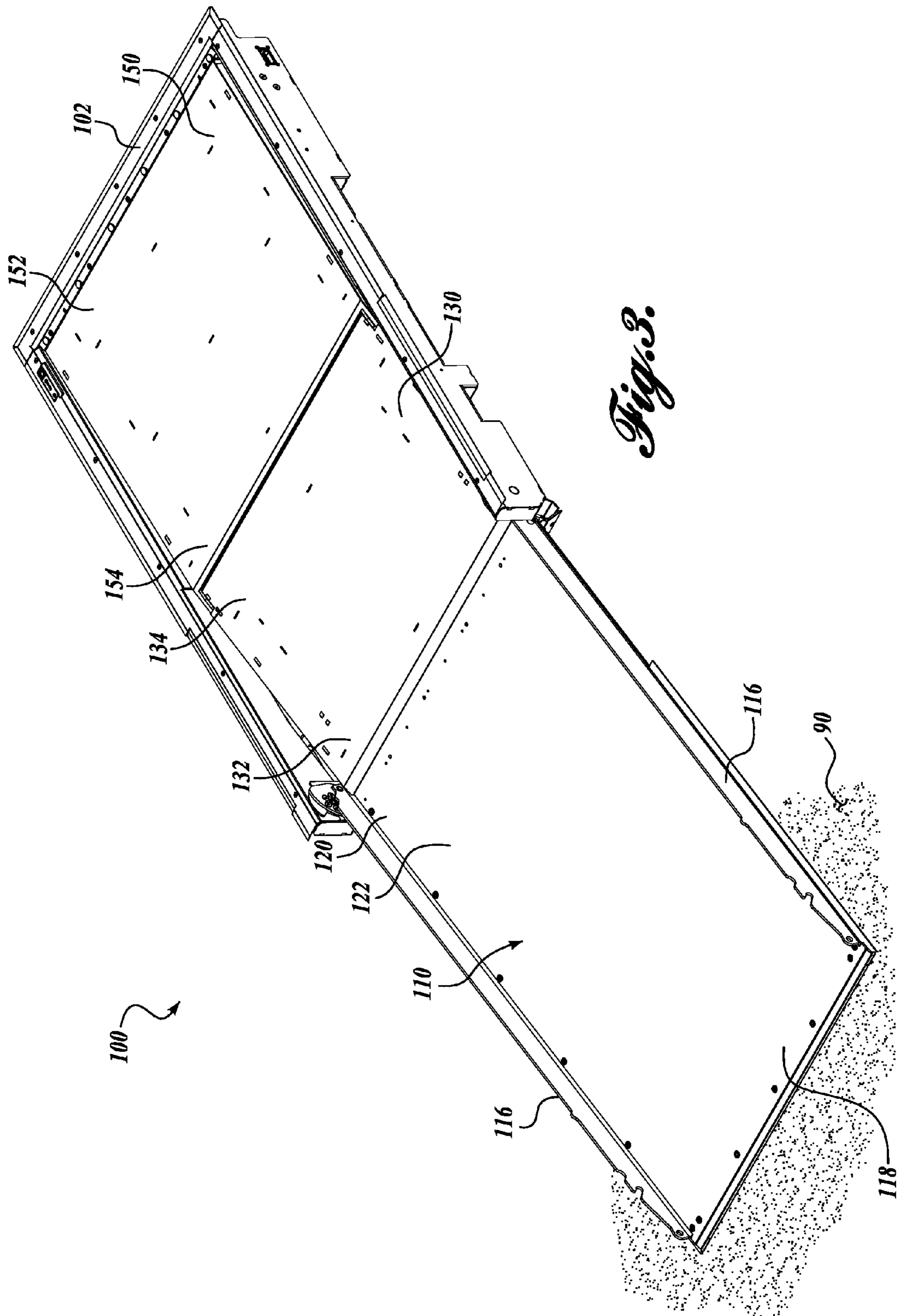


Fig. 2.



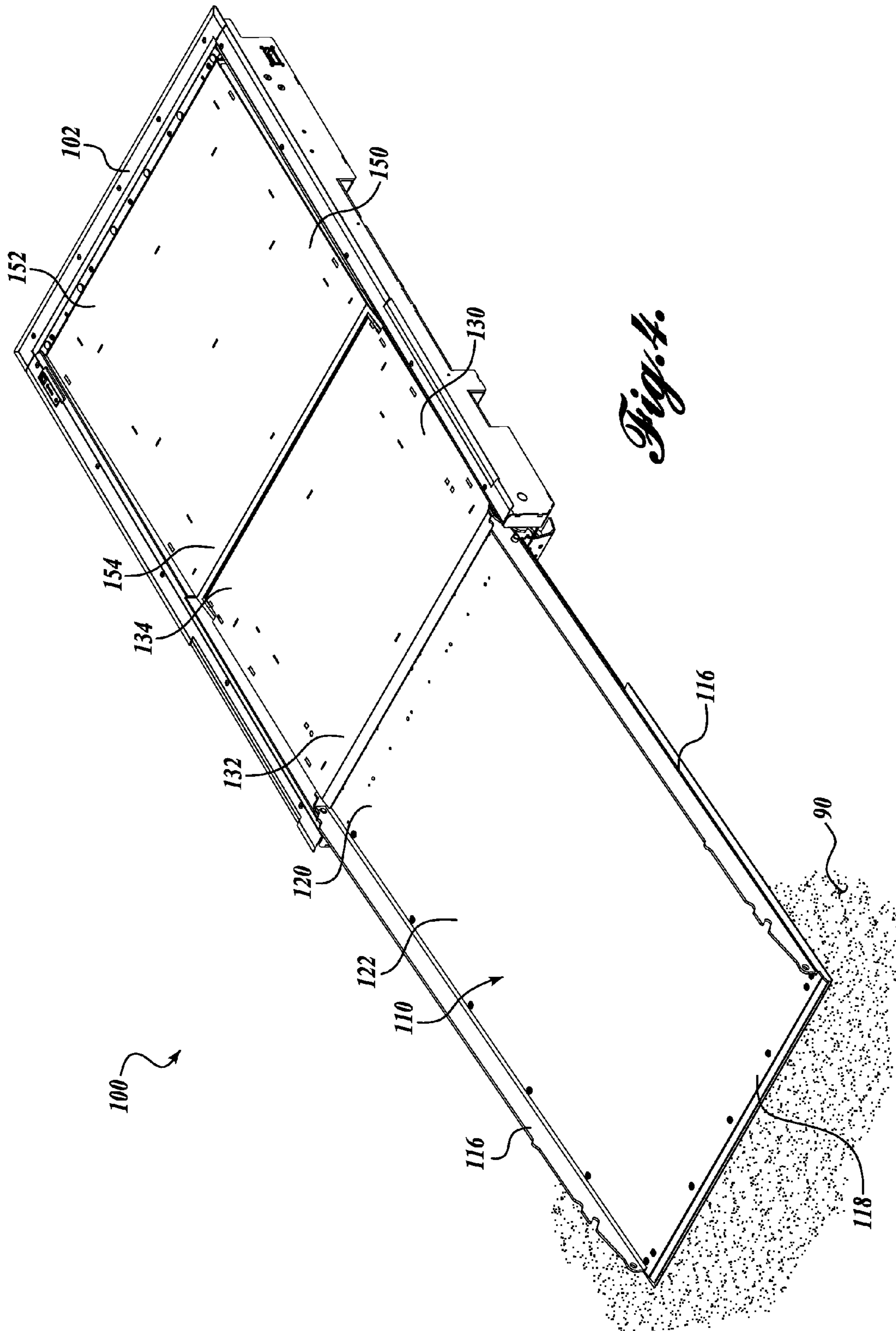


Fig. 4.

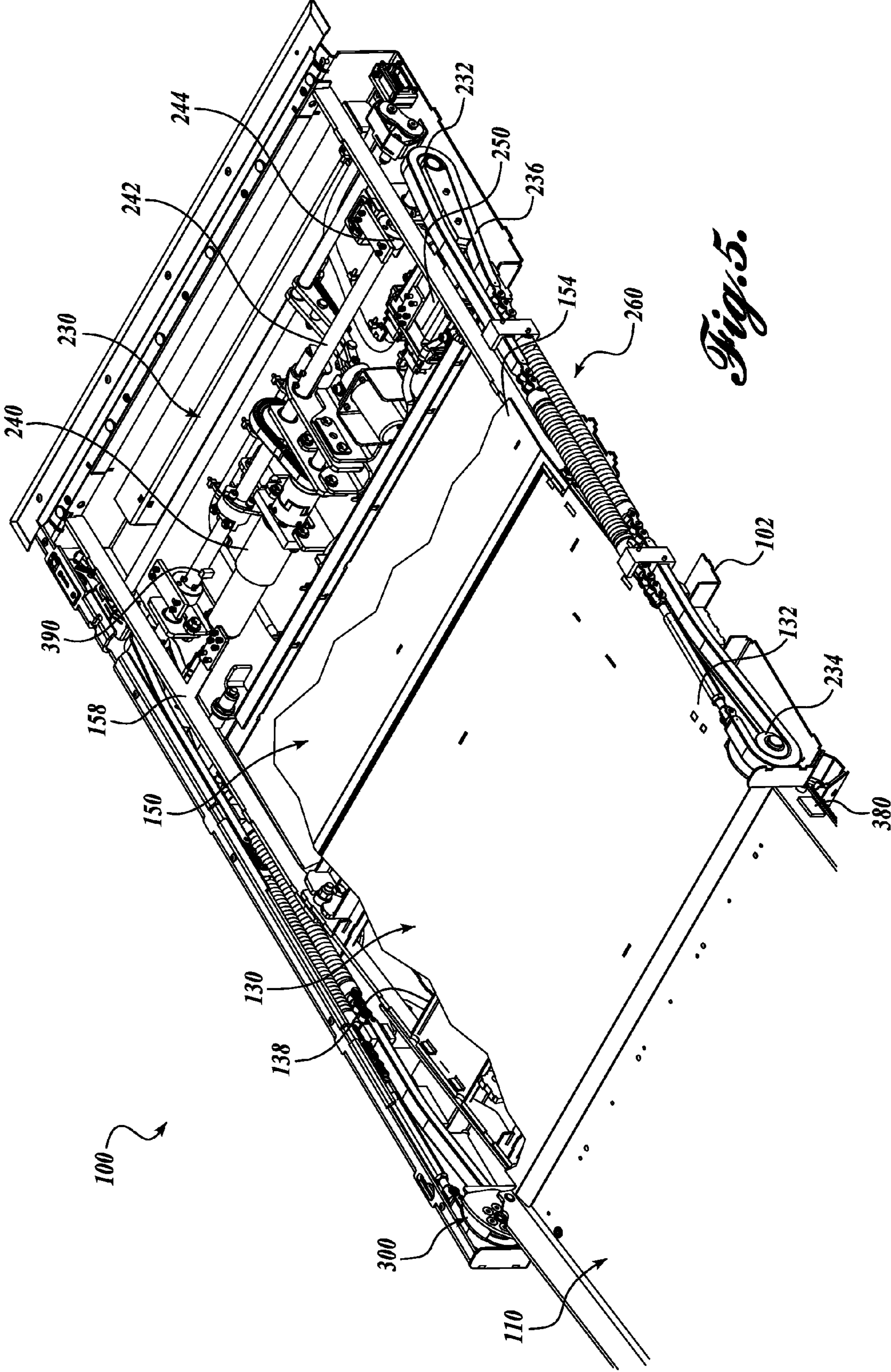


Fig. 5.

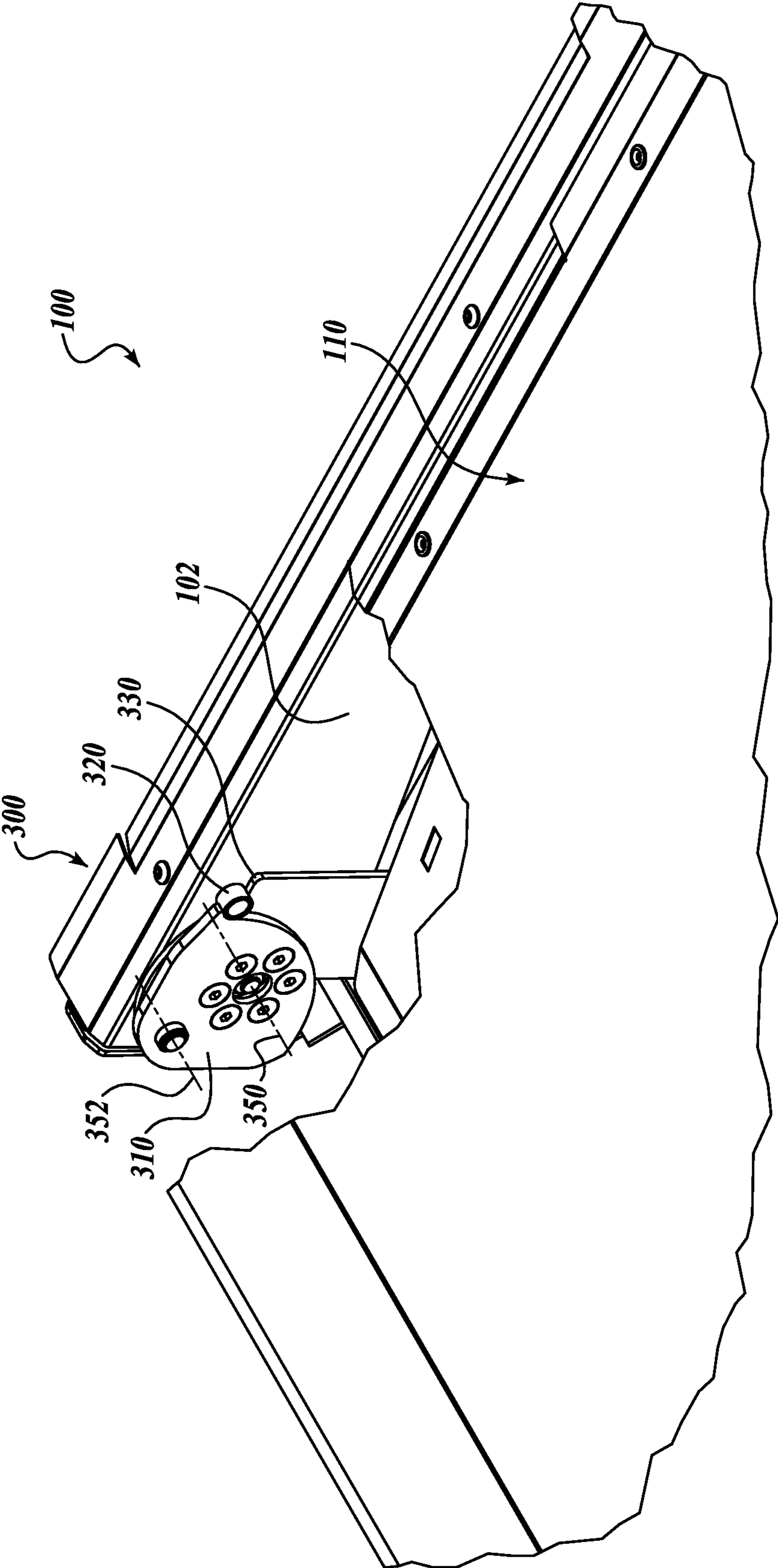


Fig. 6.

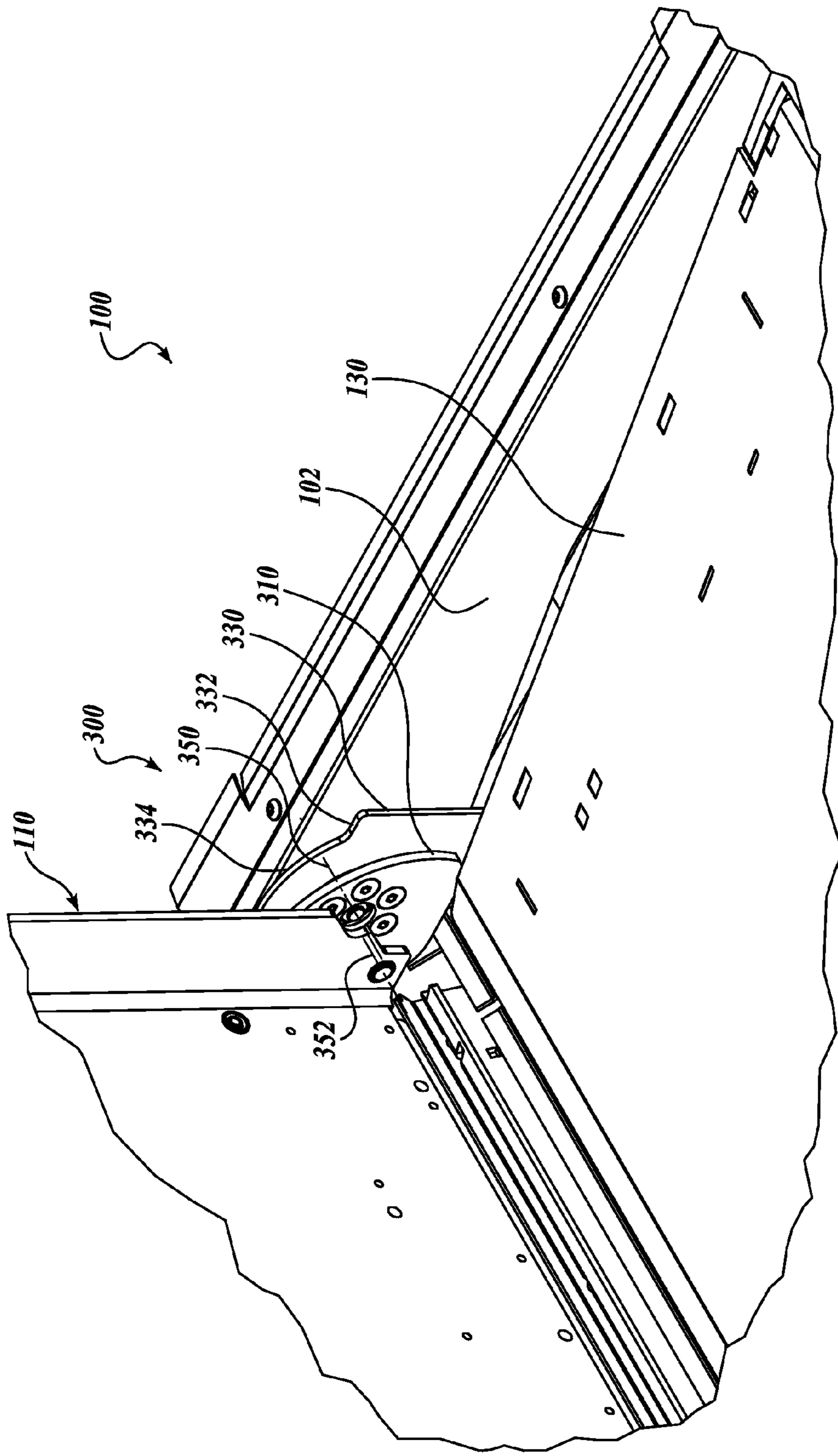


Fig. 7.

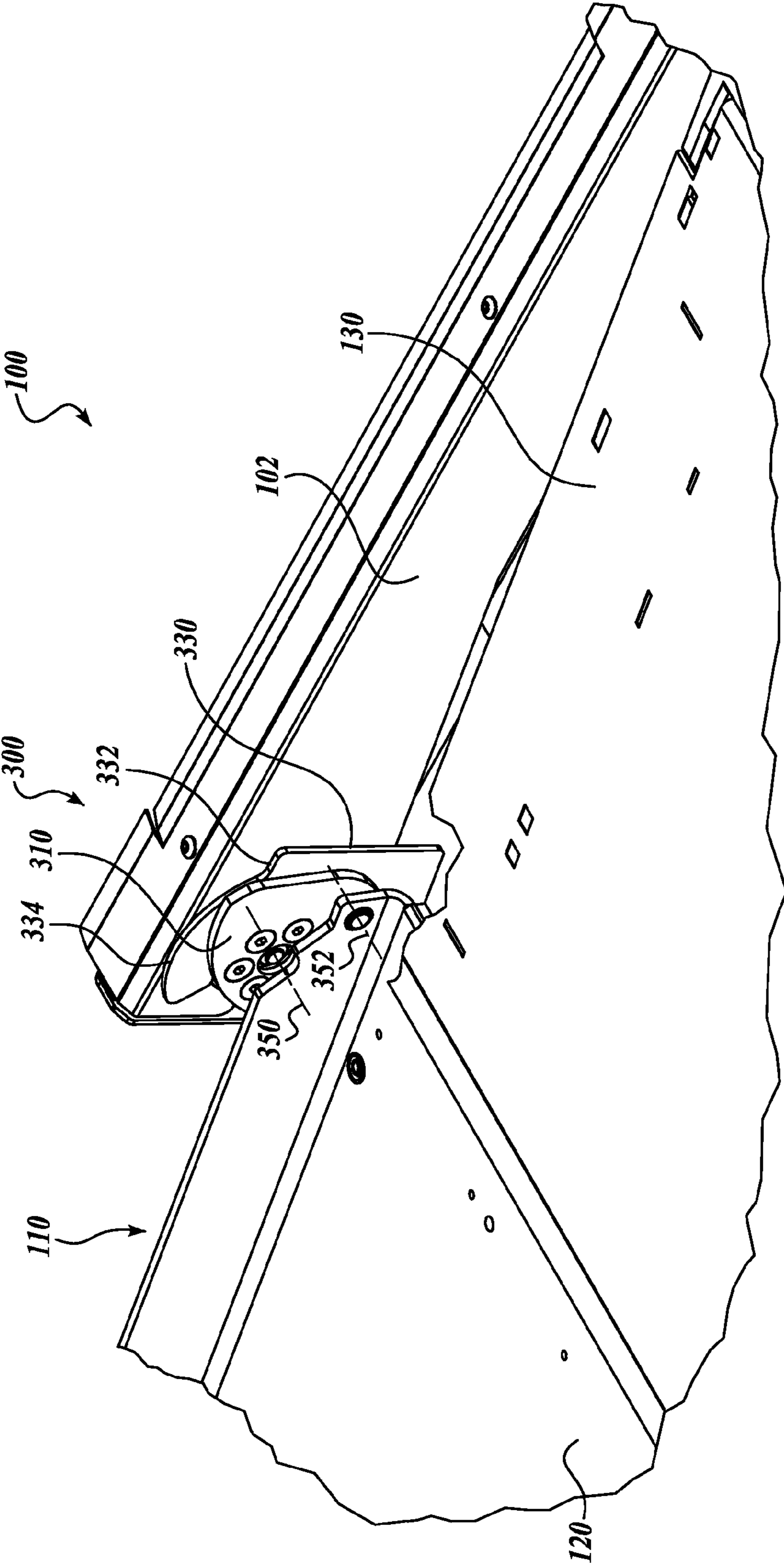


Fig. 8.

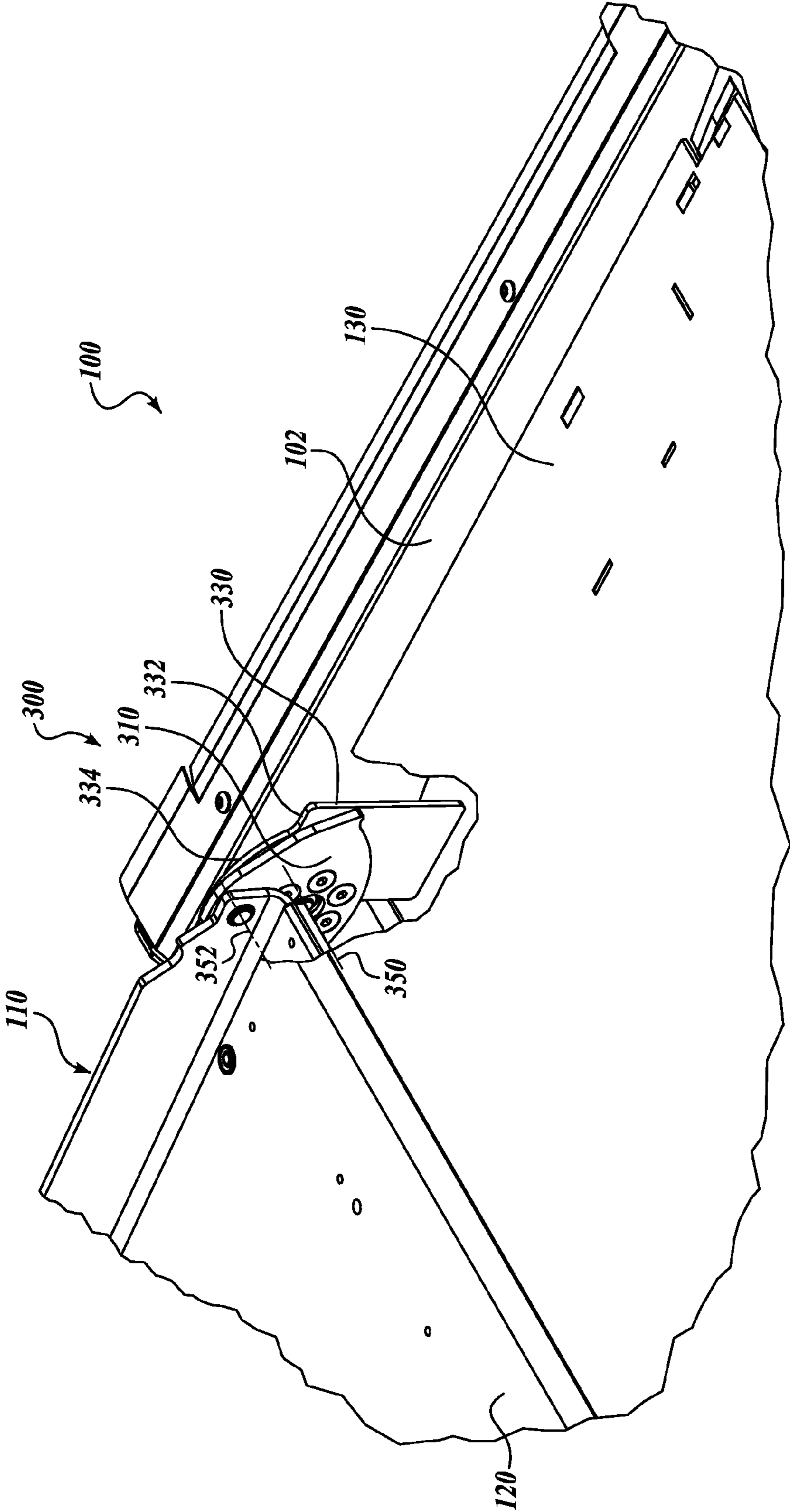


Fig. 9.

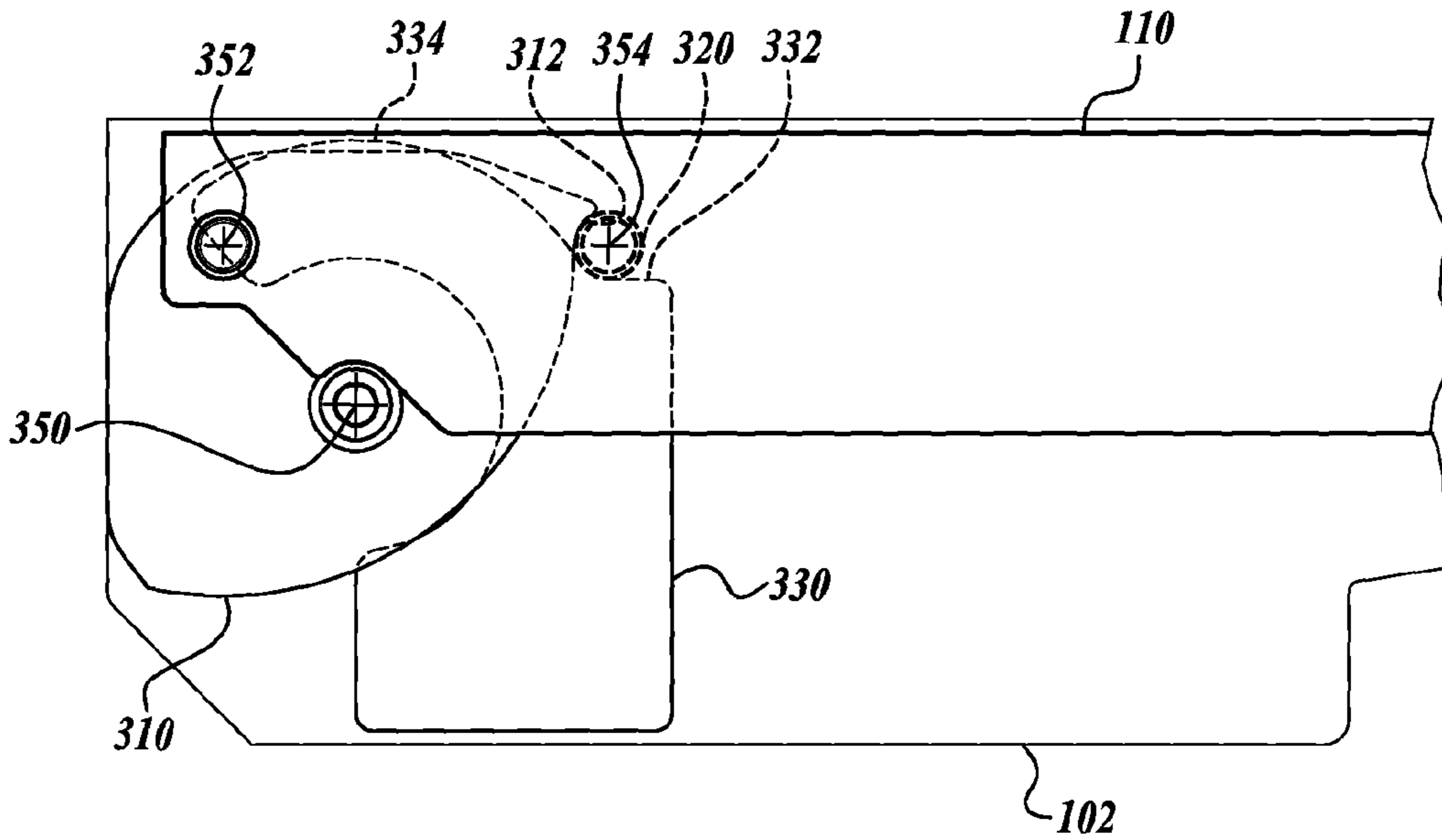


Fig. 10.

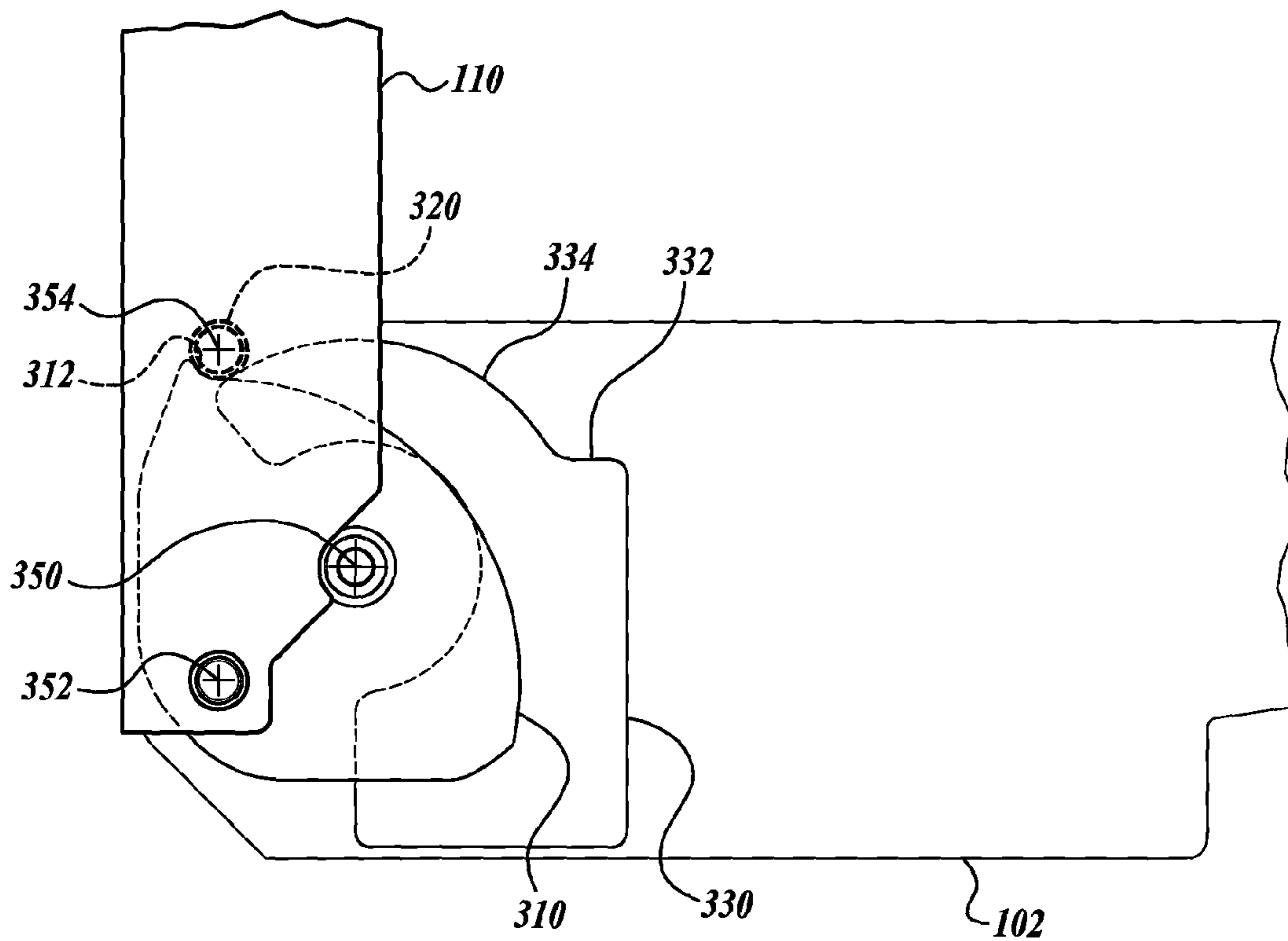


Fig. 11.

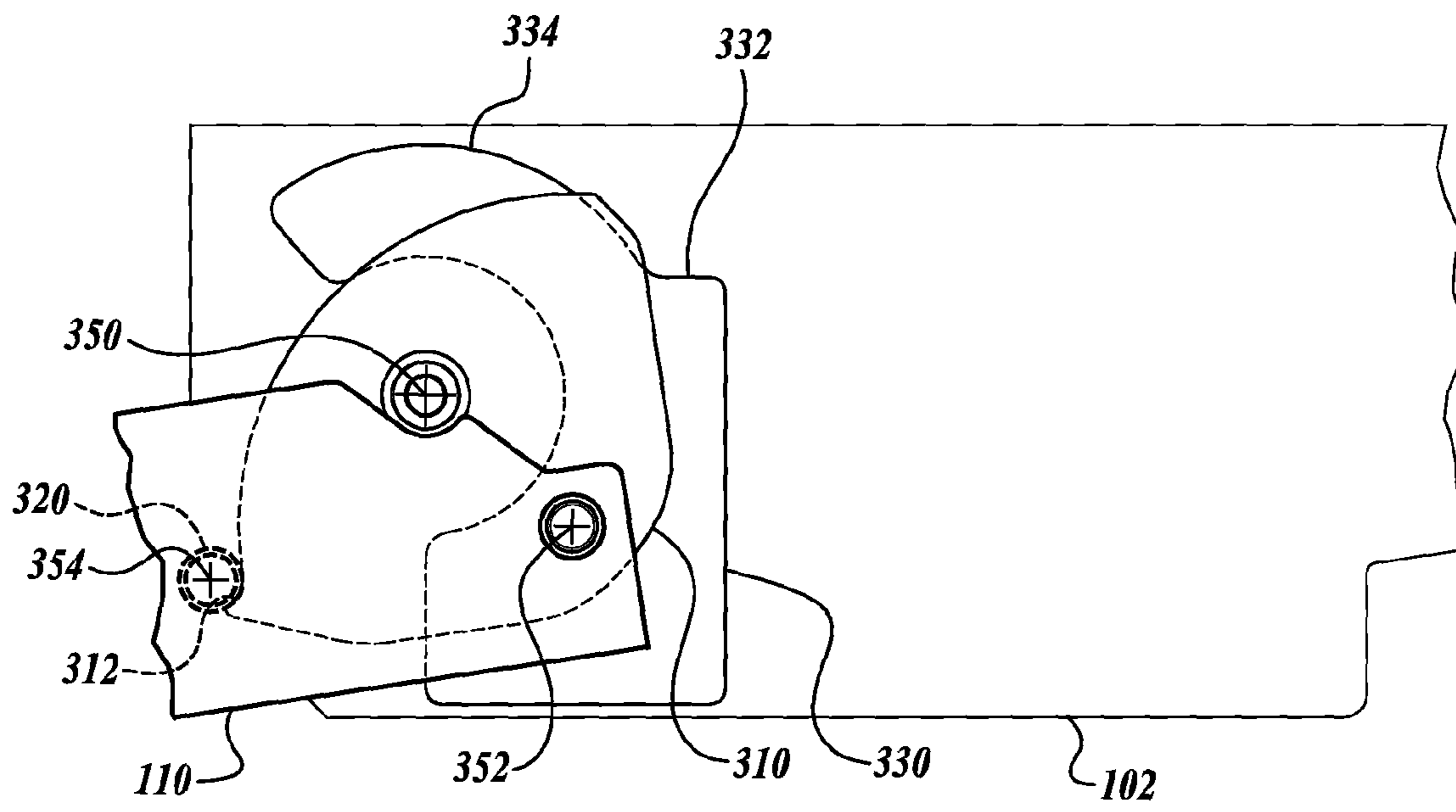


Fig. 12.

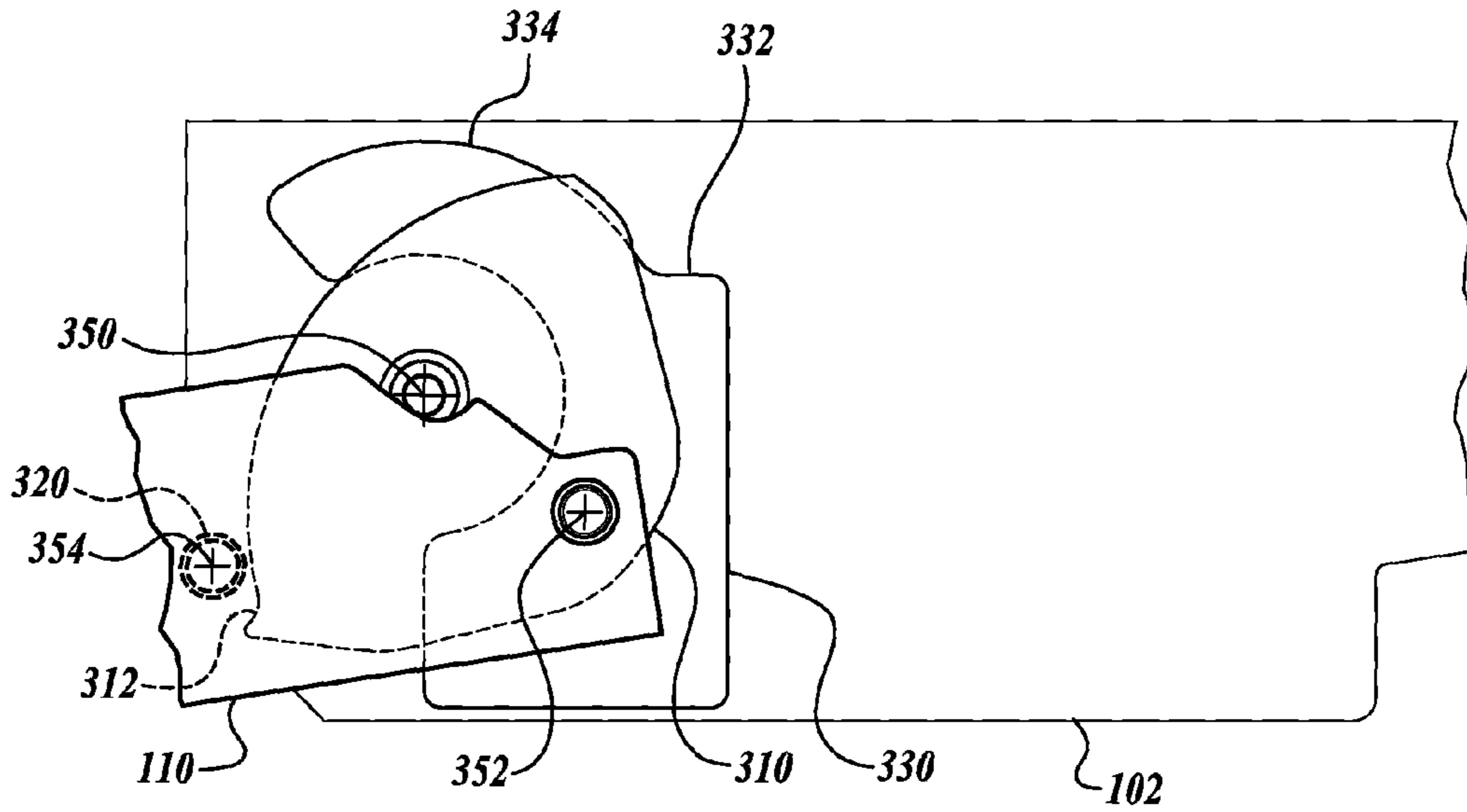


Fig. 13.

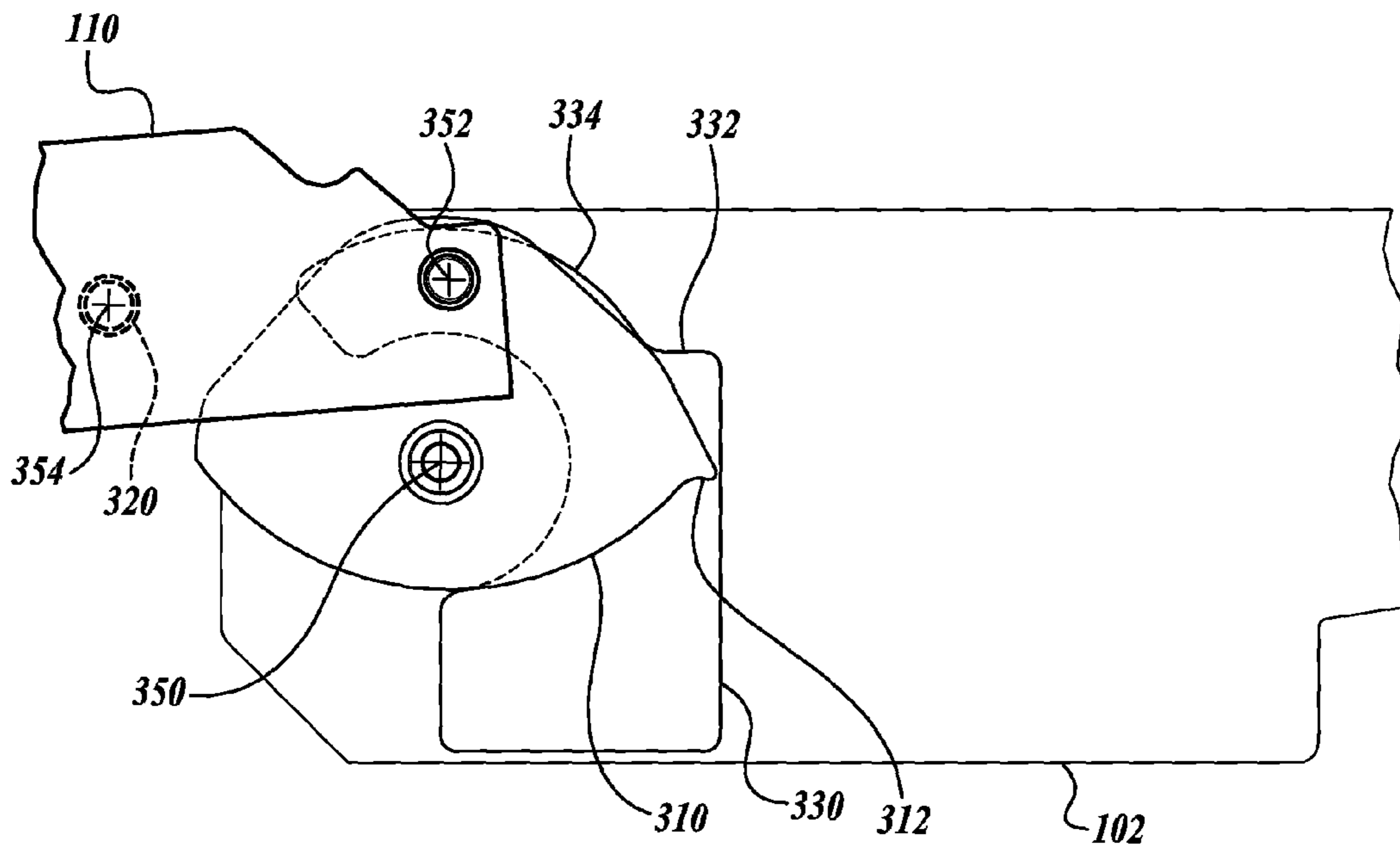


Fig. 14.

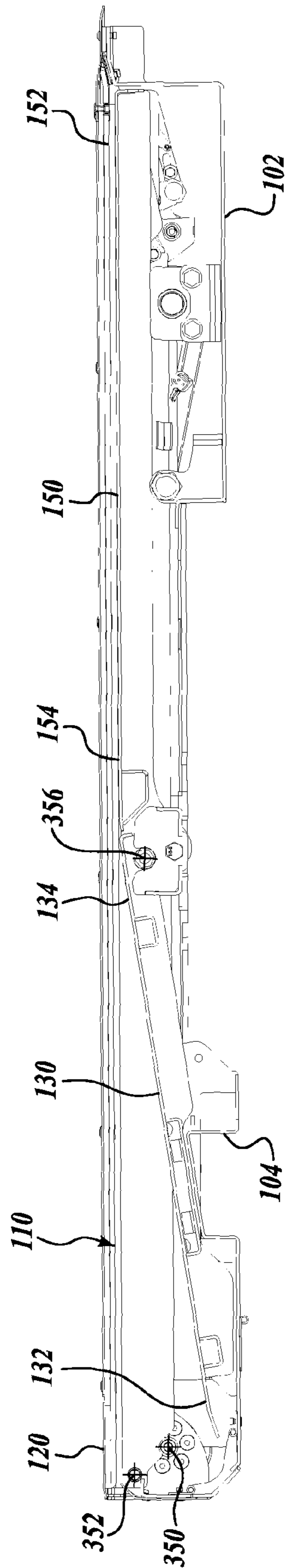


Fig. 15.

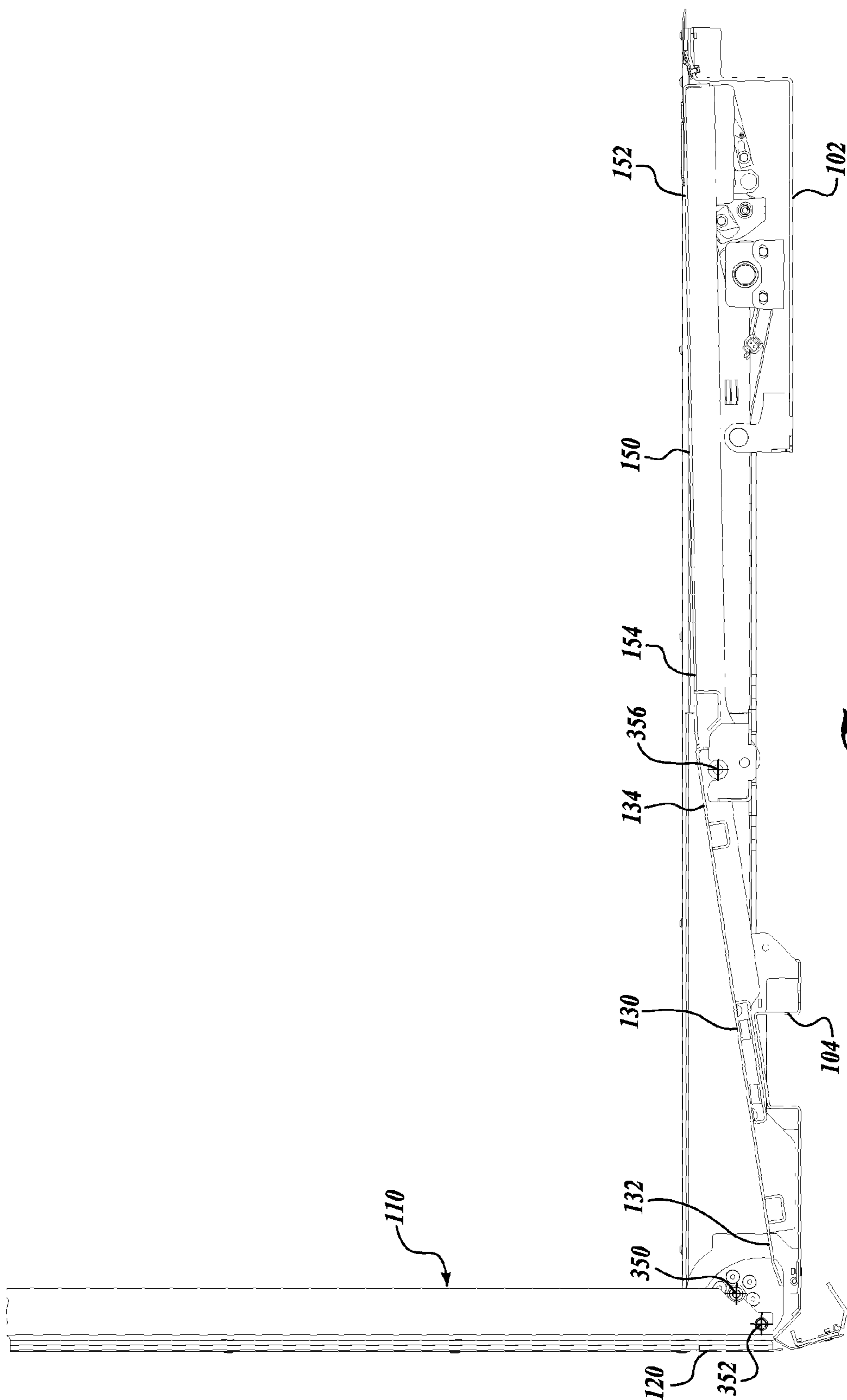


Fig. 16.

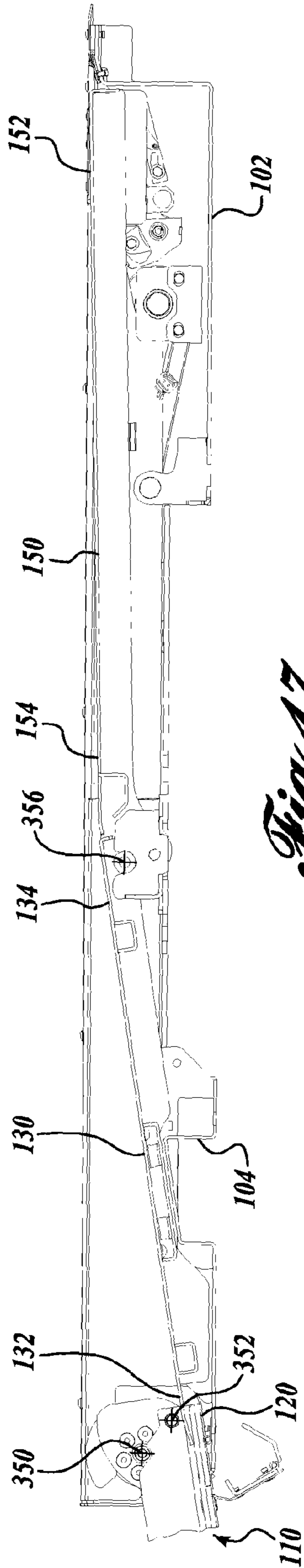


Fig. 17.

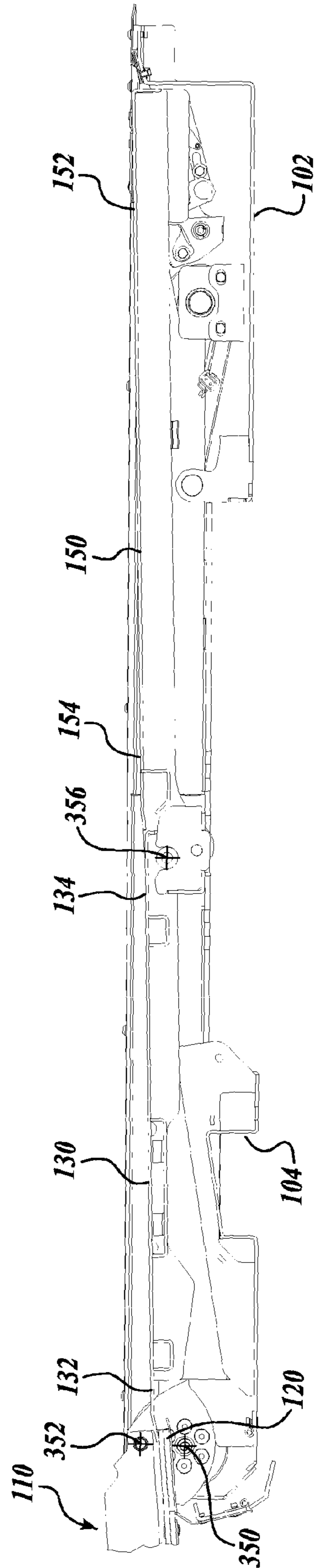


Fig. 18.

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FOLD OUT RAMP

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to wheelchair ramps and, more particularly, to a fold out ramp for a vehicle.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires the removal of physical obstacles to those who are physically challenged. The stated objective of this legislation has increased public awareness and concern over the requirements of the physically challenged. Consequentially, there has been more emphasis on providing systems that enable physically challenged people to access a motor vehicle, such as a bus or minivan.

A common manner of providing the physically challenged with access to motor vehicles is a ramp. Various ramp operating systems for motor vehicles are known in the art. Some slide out from underneath the floor of the vehicle and tilt down. Others are stowed in a vertical position and pivot about a hinge, while still others are supported by booms and cable assemblies. The present invention is generally directed to a "fold out" type of ramp. Such a ramp is normally stowed in a horizontal position within a recess in the vehicle floor, and is pivoted upward and outward to a downward-sloping extended position. In the extended position, the ramp is adjustable to account for various curb heights.

Fold out ramps on vehicles confront a variety of technical problems. One such technical issue arises from the variety of situations in which the ramps must operate. Depending on the use of the vehicle in which a particular ramp is installed, the ramp might be deployed to curbs of varying heights, as well as to a road surface. In addition, road crown, the inclusion of a "kneeling" feature on the vehicle, and other factors can affect the height of the vehicle floor relative to the alighting surface. Thus, the vertical distance through which a ramp must provide a transition surface can vary significantly.

One attempt to provide a longer ramp surface to reduce the ramp angle in a variety of situations is disclosed in U.S. Patent Publication No. 2011/0268544 ("the '544 publication"), by Koretsky et al., which published on Nov. 3, 2011, the entire disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference. The '544 publication discloses a ramp assembly that includes a self-aligning platform mechanism. The platform mechanism includes a deploying mechanism connected between a hinged platform and a ramp. The mechanism automatically aligns the ramp with the platform to assure the same angle of both components in relation to the ground surface for a low floor vehicle access ramp regardless of the height of the vehicle floor and the pivot axis of the ramp, with respect to the ground surface or curb. To ensure that the platform and the ramp deploy to the same angle in relation to the ground surface, the ramp assembly has a switch disposed on the ramp. When the ramp reaches an aligned position with respect to the platform, i.e., when the ramp surface is parallel to the platform surface, the switch is actuated to stop the motor of the drive system.

While certain advantages are provided by ensuring that the ramp surface aligns with the platform surface when the ramp assembly is deployed, such a configuration also presents disadvantages. Some such disadvantages arise from the typical placement of a ramp assembly in a bus.

Ramp assemblies such as the one disclosed in the '544 publication are commonly installed at the front of a bus so that the ramp extends laterally toward the curb to provide a sloped transition surface between the interior of the bus and an

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alighting surface, such as a curb. To enter the bus, a disabled passenger travels up the inclined surface and then turns at the top of the ramp into the aisle of the vehicle. To exit the bus, the disabled passenger moves up the aisle until aligned with the ramp and then turns toward the curb and exits down the inclined surface. Passengers entering or exiting a bus will often "cut the corner" between the inclined surface and the vehicle aisle. That is, a passenger entering the bus may start to turn into the vehicle aisle while still positioned on the inclined surface. Similarly, a passenger exiting the bus may turn toward the curb before he or she is far enough forward in the aisle. In both cases, the drop off formed between the vehicle floor and side of the inclined surface of the deployed ramp assembly presents an obstacle to the passenger. For a passenger entering the bus, prematurely turning into the vehicle aisle requires the passenger to navigate up and over the lip, which can cause difficulty for passengers in wheelchairs, using walkers, or with otherwise limited mobility. For a passenger exiting the bus, prematurely turning onto the inclined surface can cause the passenger to drop off of the vehicle floor onto the inclined surface.

In view of the noted disadvantages that can accompany ramp assemblies like the one disclosed in the '544 publication, it would be advantageous to minimize the slope of the roadside portion of the deployed ramp assembly, while keeping the curbside portion of the deployed ramp assembly below a predetermined maximum slope. Minimizing the slope of the roadside portion of the deployed ramp assembly reduces the height of the drop off formed between the vehicle floor and the inclined surface, while keeping the curbside portion of the deployed ramp assembly below a predetermined maximum slope makes the ramp easier to navigate.

SUMMARY

A method for deploying a ramp assembly is disclosed. The ramp assembly provides a transition surface between a vehicle floor and an alighting surface and is moveable between a stowed position, a first deployed position, and a second deployed position. The ramp assembly includes a ramp portion coupled for rotational movement and a panel rotatable about a first end. The ramp portion supportingly engages a second end of the panel to elevate the second end of the panel as the ramp portion moves toward the second deployed position.

The method of deploying the ramp portion includes the step of rotating the ramp portion until the ramp portion contacts the alighting surface. The method further includes the step of rotating the ramp portion until the ramp assembly reaches the first deployed position, in which the ramp portion forms a predetermined angle with the panel. The method also includes the step of selectively rotating the ramp portion to the second deployment position.

This summary is provided to introduce a selection of concepts in a simplified form that are further described below in the Detailed Description. This summary is not intended to identify key features of the claimed subject matter, nor is it intended to be used as an aid in determining the scope of the claimed subject matter.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The foregoing aspects and many of the attendant advantages of this invention will become more readily appreciated as the same become better understood by reference to the following detailed description, when taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, wherein:

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FIG. 1 is an isometric view of an exemplary embodiment of a ramp assembly with a ramp portion in the stowed position;

FIG. 2 is an isometric view of the ramp assembly shown in FIG. 1, with the ramp portion in a neutral position;

FIG. 3 is an isometric view of the ramp assembly shown in FIG. 1, with the ramp portion in a first deployed position;

FIG. 4 is an isometric view of the ramp assembly shown in FIG. 1, with the ramp portion in a second deployed position;

FIG. 5 is a partial isometric view of a drive assembly of the ramp assembly of FIG. 1;

FIG. 6 is a partial isometric view of a support assembly of the ramp assembly of FIG. 1, with the ramp portion in the stowed position;

FIG. 7 is a partial isometric view of the support assembly of FIG. 6, with the ramp portion in the neutral position;

FIG. 8 is a partial isometric view of the support assembly of FIG. 6, with the ramp portion in the first deployed position;

FIG. 9 is a partial isometric view of the support assembly of FIG. 6, with the ramp portion in the second deployed position;

FIG. 10 is a side view of the support assembly of FIG. 6, with the ramp assembly in the stowed position;

FIG. 11 is a side view of the support assembly of FIG. 10, with the ramp assembly in the neutral position;

FIG. 12 is a side view of the support assembly of FIG. 10, with the ramp portion contacting the alighting surface;

FIG. 13 is a side view of the support assembly of FIG. 10, with the ramp assembly in the first deployed position;

FIG. 14 is a side view of the support assembly of FIG. 10, with the ramp assembly in the second deployed position;

FIG. 15 is a side cross-sectional view of the ramp assembly of FIG. 1, with the ramp portion in the stowed position;

FIG. 16 is a partial, side cross-sectional view of the ramp assembly of FIG. 15, with the ramp portion in the neutral position;

FIG. 17 is a partial, side cross-sectional view of the ramp assembly of FIG. 15, with the ramp portion in the first deployed position; and

FIG. 18 is a partial, side cross-sectional view of the ramp assembly of FIG. 15, with the ramp portion in the second deployed position.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Exemplary embodiments of the disclosed fold out ramp will now be described with reference to the accompanying drawings, where like numerals correspond to like elements. The described embodiments are directed to ramp assemblies, and more specifically, wheelchair ramp assemblies. In particular, several embodiments are directed to wheelchair ramp assemblies suitable for use in buses, vans, etc. Several embodiments of the present invention are directed to compact ramp assemblies for a vehicle that, when stowed, occupy a small amount of space within the vehicle floor, yet deploy to a length that effectively reduces the ramp slope encountered by the mobility impaired, thus facilitating greater independence and safety for wheelchair-bound passengers.

The following discussion proceeds with reference to examples of wheelchair ramp assemblies for use in vehicles having a floor, such as a bus, van, etc. While the examples provided herein have been described with reference to their association with vehicles, it will be apparent to one skilled in the art that this is done for illustrative purposes and should not be construed as limiting the scope of the disclosed subject matter, as claimed. Thus, it will be apparent to one skilled in the art that aspects of the disclosed fold out ramp may be employed with other ramp assemblies used in stationary installations, such as residential buildings and the like. The

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following detailed description may use illustrative terms such as vertical, horizontal, front, rear, curbside (outboard), roadside (inboard), inner, proximal, distal, etc.; however, these terms are descriptive in nature and should not be construed as limiting. Further, it will be appreciated that various embodiments of the disclosed fold out ramp may employ any combination of features described herein.

FIGS. 1-4 illustrate one exemplary embodiment of a fold out ramp assembly **100** (hereinafter “ramp assembly **100**”) as it moves from a stowed position (FIG. 1) through a neutral position (FIG. 2) and a first deployed position (FIG. 3) to a second deployed position (FIG. 4). The ramp assembly **100** includes a frame **102**, a ramp portion **110**, an intermediate panel **130**, and an inner panel **150**. The frame **102** of the ramp assembly **100** is adapted to be mounted to a vehicle (not shown) having a floor, such as a bus or a van. The ramp assembly **100** is reciprocal between the stowed position, shown in FIG. 1, and the first and second deployed positions of FIGS. 3 and 4.

Although the illustrated embodiments of the ramp assembly **100** include a frame **102**, other embodiments are contemplated in which the ramp assembly **100** does not include a frame. To install such embodiments in vehicles, the ramp assembly **100** components can be attached directly to the structure of the vehicle or to a suitable structure within the vehicle, thus making a frame **102** unnecessary. Similarly, when such embodiments are installed in stationary installations, such as residential buildings and the like, the ramp assembly **100** components can be attached to the structure of the building or any other suitable structure within the building. Accordingly, embodiments of the described ramp assembly **100** that do not include a frame should be considered within the scope of the present disclosure.

The ramp portion **110** includes a panel **114** constructed from well-known materials. The ramp portion **110** further includes side curbs **116** that extend upwardly from the forward and rear sides of the panel **114**. The side curbs **116** increase the strength of the ramp portion **110** and provide edge guards for the sides of the ramp portion **110**, thereby increasing the overall safety of the ramp assembly **100**. In the illustrated embodiment, the curbside end **118** of the ramp portion **110** (when the ramp is in a deployed position) is tapered to provide a smooth transition between the panel **114** and the alighting surface **90** when the ramp assembly **100** is in a deployed position, although such a feature may not be necessary, depending on the thickness of the panel.

Referring to FIG. 1, when the ramp assembly **100** is in the stowed position, the ramp portion **110** extends inwardly such that the ramp is disposed over the intermediate panel **130** and the inner panel **150**. When in the stowed position, the lower surface **112** of the ramp panel **114** faces upward and is oriented to be generally flush with the vehicle floor, thereby providing a surface upon which able-bodied passengers can walk while entering and exiting the vehicle. When the ramp portion **110** is in a deployed position, the ramp extends in an outward and downward direction so that the upper surface **122** of the panel **114** faces upward and provides an inclined transition surface from the intermediate panel **130** to the alighting surface **90**.

In the first deployed position of FIG. 3, the ramp portion **110** extends in a curbside and downward direction to contact an alighting surface **90**, such as a curb or road surface, thus cooperating with the intermediate panel **130** and inner panel **150** to provide a transition between the vehicle and the alighting surface **90**. When the ramp assembly **100** is in the first deployed position, the ramp portion **110** is generally coplanar to or parallel with the intermediate panel **130**. That is, the

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angle formed by the ramp portion and the intermediate panel 130 is approximately 180°. Various alternate embodiments are contemplated in which the angle formed between the ramp portion 110 and the intermediate panel 130 in the first deployed position is greater than or less than 180°. In this regard, the angle formed by the ramp portion 110 and the intermediate panel 130 in the first deployed position can be any angle that provides a suitable transition between the ramp portion and the intermediate panel 130. In one non-limiting example, the angle formed by the ramp portion 110 and the intermediate panel 130 in the first deployed position is in the range of 170°-190°.

In the second deployed position of FIG. 4, the ramp portion 110 has rotated beyond the first deployment position such that the angle between the ramp portion and the intermediate panel 130 has increased relative to the first deployed position, but the angle between the intermediate panel and the vehicle floor has decreased, i.e., the slope of the ramp portion has increased, while the slope of the intermediate panel has decreased.

As shown in FIGS. 6-14, the roadside end 120 of the ramp portion 110 is connected to a support assembly 300. The illustrated support assembly 300 includes structure to support the ramp portion at the forward end and rear end. In the illustrated embodiment, the forward structure is a mirror image of the rear structure. For the sake of clarity, the rear portion of the support assembly 300 is described herein with the understanding that unless otherwise indicated, each element of the rear portion of the support assembly 300 has a corresponding element on the forward portion of the support assembly 300. It should be appreciated, however, that various embodiments are contemplated in which the forward and rear portions of the support assembly 300 are similar, but not mirror images of each other. In this regard, variations between the forward and rear portions of the support assembly are possible and should be considered within the scope of the present disclosure.

A cam element 330 is fixedly located relative to the frame 102 at the curbside end of the ramp assembly 100, adjacent to the roadside end 120 of the ramp portion 110. In the illustrated embodiment, the cam element 330 is formed from metal sheet or plate and extends upward in a vertical direction from a lower portion of the ramp assembly. A cam surface 334 is formed on the upper end of the cam element 330, and a generally flat, horizontal support surface 332 is formed at the roadside end of the cam surface 334. It will be appreciated that the illustrated cam element 330 is exemplary only and should not be considered limiting. In this regard, embodiments utilizing other suitable materials, shapes, and configurations are contemplated, and such variations should be considered within the scope of the present disclosure.

A support element 310 is rotatably coupled to the frame 102 about an axis 350. A tang extends from the perimeter of the support element 310 to define a recess 312 in the profile of the support element. In the illustrated embodiment, the support element 310 is formed from metal sheet or plate and is positioned to be generally parallel to the cam element 330. The support element 310 is operably coupled to a drive assembly 230 (described later) that selectively rotates the support element 310 relative to the cam element 330.

The roadside end 120 of the ramp portion 110 is rotatably coupled to the support element 310 about an axis 352 that is parallel to and offset from axis 350. As a result, rotation of the support element 310 about axis 350 moves axis 352 along an arcuate path. This, in turn, moves the roadside end 120 of the ramp portion 110 about an arcuate path.

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A bearing element 320 is disposed on the rear surface of the side curb 116 of the ramp portion 110. In the illustrated embodiment, the bearing element 320 is a roller bearing that is rotatably mounted to the ramp portion 110 about an axis 354, wherein the axis is generally parallel to axes 350 and 352. As will be described in detail later, the bearing element is positioned to rollingly engage the support surface 332 and cam surface 334 of the cam element 330 during various portions of the stow/deploy motion of the ramp assembly 100. In addition, the bearing element 320 engages the recess 312 of the support element 310 during a portion of the stow/deploy motion of the ramp assembly 100. In this regard, the bearing element 320 engages various features of the support assembly 300 during the stow/deploy motion in order to control the orientation of the ramp portion 110 relative to the support element 310 when the ramp portion is not in contact with the alighting surface 90.

It will be appreciated that alternative embodiments of the described bearing element 320 are possible. In one embodiment, the bearing element 320 is a pin fixedly attached to the ramp portion to slidably engage various features of the support assembly 300 during the stow/deploy motion. In another exemplary embodiment, the bearing element 320 is a boss formed in the side curb 116 of the ramp portion. These and other configurations suitable to engage various features of the support assembly 300 to control the orientation of the ramp portion during the stow/deploy motion are contemplated and should be considered within the scope of the present disclosure.

As shown in FIG. 5, the illustrated intermediate panel 130 includes a flat panel element disposed above and coupled to a panel support 138. The panel support 138 provides additional strength and rigidity to the panel. The illustrated embodiment of the intermediate panel 130 is exemplary, and it will be appreciated that alternate configurations of the intermediate panel 130 with different panels and supports are possible and should be considered within the scope of the present disclosure.

As shown in FIGS. 15-18, the roadside end 134 of the intermediate panel 130 is rotatably mounted to the frame 102 about an axis 356. The curbside end 132 of the intermediate panel 130 is supported by a portion of the frame 102 when the ramp assembly 100 is in the stowed position (FIG. 15). More specifically, in the illustrated embodiment, the frame 102 includes a C-channel 104 extending from the forward end of the frame to the rear end of the frame. When the ramp assembly 100 is in the stowed position, the C-channel 104 engages a lower portion of the support panel 138 to support the curbside end 132 of the intermediate panel 130. As the ramp assembly moves from the stowed position to the second deployed position (FIG. 18), the curbside end 132 of the intermediate panel 130 is raised to correspond to the roadside end 120 of the ramp portion 110 so that the intermediate panel 130 and the ramp portion 110 cooperate to provide a transition surface between the inner panel 150 and the alighting surface 90.

Referring to FIGS. 15 and 16, as the ramp portion 110 begins to move from the stowed position toward the first deployed position, the intermediate panel 130 is supported at the curbside end 132 by the frame 102. As the ramp portion 110 continues to rotate toward the second deployed position of FIG. 18, the roadside end 120 of the ramp portion 110 engages the bottom of the curbside end 132 of the intermediate panel 130 so that rotation of the ramp portion raises the curbside end of the intermediate panel. As shown in FIGS. 17 and 18, raising the curbside end 132 of the intermediate panel 130 rotates the intermediate panel about axis 356.

As described in further detail below, the inner panel **150** of the illustrated embodiment is rotatably coupled at the curbside end **154** about axis **356**. As a result, throughout the range of deployed positions, the curbside end **132** of the intermediate panel **130** maintains a close proximity to the roadside end **120** of the ramp portion **110**, and the roadside end **134** of the intermediate panel maintains a close proximity to the curbside end **154** of the inner panel **150**. Because the ends of the intermediate panel are associated with the ramp portion **110** and inner panel **150** in this manner, the intermediate panel provides a suitable transition surface between the ramp portion and the inner panel throughout the range of deployment positions.

As shown in FIGS. **5** and **15-18**, the inner panel **150** is configured to reciprocate between a lowered position (FIG. **15**), when the ramp assembly **100** is in the stowed position, and a raised position (FIGS. **17** and **18**) when the ramp assembly is in a deployed position. Referring specifically to FIG. **5**, the disclosed embodiment of the inner panel is supported by an inner panel support **158** disposed beneath the inner panel. The illustrated embodiment of the inner panel **150** is exemplary, and it will be appreciated that alternate configurations of the inner panel **150** with different panels and supports are possible and should be considered within the scope of the present disclosure.

The inner panel **150** is rotatably coupled at the curbside end **154** to the frame **102** about axis **356**. Although the inner panel **150** is shown to be rotatable about the same axis **356** as the intermediate panel **130**, the panels may be rotatable about different axes provided that there is a suitable transition between the panels when the ramp assembly **100** is deployed.

The roadside end **152** of the inner panel **150** is supported by a selectively rotatable eccentric bearing element **244**. As the eccentric bearing element is selectively rotated about its axis, the roadside end **152** of the inner panel **150** moves between a lowered position and a raised position, thereby rotating the inner panel **150** about axis **356**. More specifically, the eccentric bearing selectively rotates the inner panel between a lowered position, when the ramp assembly is in the stowed position (FIG. **15**), and a raised position (FIGS. **17** and **18**), when the ramp assembly **100** is in a deployed position.

As illustrated, the inner panel **150** is a rising floor that selectively moves between a lowered position and a raised position as the ramp assembly moves from the stowed position to a deployed position. Other embodiments are contemplated in which other known mechanisms are included to raise and lower the floor. Still other embodiments of the disclosed ramp assembly **100** are possible in which the inner panel **150** does not move during the stow/deploy motion, but instead remains in a fixed position relative to the vehicle floor. These and other embodiments are contemplated and should be considered within the scope of the present disclosure.

Referring back to FIG. **5**, the drive assembly **230** actuates the ramp portion **110** to move between the stowed position and the first and second deployed positions. More specifically, the drive assembly **230** selectively rotates support element **310** of the support assembly **300** and the eccentric bearing element that supports the inner panel **150** to reciprocate the ramp assembly **100** between the stowed position and the deployed positions. The disclosed drive assembly **230** is similar to the drive assembly disclosed in U.S. Pat. No. 7,681,272, issued to Morris et al., incorporated by reference herein. It will be appreciated that the drive assembly of Morris et al. is only one exemplary drive assembly suitable for use with the presently disclosed ramp assembly, and that any number of other suitable drive assemblies can be utilized in conjunction with or in place of the drive assembly of Morris et al.

A forward portion of the drive assembly **230** is located on the forward side of the frame **102**, and a rear portion of the drive assembly is similarly located on the rear side of the frame **102**, wherein each element of the forward portion of the drive assembly **230** corresponds to a similar element of the rear portion of the drive assembly. For the sake of clarity, the forward portion of the drive assembly **230** is described herein with the understanding that unless otherwise indicated, each element of the forward portion has a corresponding element on the rear portion of the drive assembly **230**.

The drive assembly **230** includes a roadside sprocket **232** and a curbside sprocket **234** that are rotatably coupled to the forward side of the frame **102** so that the axes of rotation of the sprockets extend in the forward/rearward direction. A drive chain assembly **236** forms an endless loop that engages the teeth of the curbside sprocket **234** and the teeth of the roadside sprocket **232**. As a result, movement of the drive chain assembly **236** along the path of the endless loop rotates the roadside sprocket **232** and the curbside sprocket **234**.

A drive shaft **242** is coupled to the roadside sprocket **232** and also to a motor **240** by a known transmission assembly. The motor **240** is selectively operated by a controller **250** to rotate the roadside sprocket **232**, which acts as a drive sprocket, to rotate the curbside sprocket **234** via the drive chain assembly **236**. In one embodiment, a single motor **240** drives the roadside sprocket **232** of the forward portion of the drive chain assembly **236** and also the roadside sprocket of the rear portion of the drive chain assembly. In another embodiment, each roadside sprocket is driven by a separate motor. In other alternate embodiments, the drive shaft **242** connects the motor **240** to the curbside sprocket or to a separate drive sprocket that engages the drive chain assembly.

The curbside sprocket **234** is operably coupled to the support assembly **300** so that rotation of the roadside sprocket **232** rotates the support element **310** of the support assembly **300**. In the illustrated embodiment, the curbside sprocket **234** is coupled to the support element **310** so that the roadside sprocket **232** rotation is at a 1:1 ratio with the support element **310**. It will be appreciated that the roadside sprocket **232** or any other drive sprocket can be coupled directly or indirectly to the support element **310**, and that various known transmissions can be utilized to create drive sprocket to support element rotation ratios that are greater than or less than 1:1.

In the illustrated embodiment, the eccentric bearing elements **244** that support the roadside end of the inner panel **150** are coupled to the drive shaft **242** so that the inner panel **150** is raised and lowered by the selective rotation of the drive shaft **242**.

The drive assembly **230** further includes a counterbalance assembly **260**. The counterbalance assembly **260** can be any known counterbalance assembly that biases the ramp portion toward the neutral position, i.e., a position wherein the center of gravity of the ramp portion **110** is located above the axis of rotation of the ramp portion so that the center of gravity imparts no moment about the axis of rotation. By biasing the ramp portion **110** toward the neutral position, the counterbalance assembly counteracts some or all of the weight of the ramp, thereby reducing the actuating force required to reciprocate the ramp assembly **100** between the stowed position and the deployed positions. As a result, a smaller motor is required, and wear on the motor is reduced. One exemplary counterbalance suitable for use with the ramp assembly is disclosed in U.S. Pat. No. 7,681,272, issued to Morris et al., previously incorporated by reference herein. It will be appreciated that the counterbalance of Morris et al. is only one exemplary counterbalance suitable for use with the presently disclosed ramp assembly, and that any number of other suit-

able counterbalance assemblies can be utilized in conjunction with or in place of the counterbalance of Morris et al.

Referring to FIG. 5, the disclosed embodiment of the ramp assembly includes a sensor 380 for sensing the position of the ramp portion 110 relative to the intermediate panel 130. More specifically, the sensor senses the angle formed by the ramp portion 110 and the intermediate panel 130. The sensor 380 sends a signal corresponding to the sensed angle to the controller 250, which uses the sensor information during the deployment of the ramp. The sensor 380 can be any known sensor capable of sensing the angle formed by the ramp portion 110 and the intermediate panel 130. In this regard, the sensor can be a proximity sensor, an inclinometer, or any other suitable sensor or combination of sensors capable of sensing the position of the ramp portion 110 relative to the intermediate panel 130.

A second sensor 390 detects the travel of the ramp portion 110 based on the rotation of the drive shaft 242 of the drive assembly 230. In the illustrated embodiment, the sensor 390 detects one or more targets disposed on the drive shaft in order to sense rotation of the shaft. It will be appreciated that the sensor 390 is not limited to the illustrated embodiment, but can include any type of sensor suitable for detecting motion or position of the ramp portion 110. Moreover, the sensor is not limited to detecting motion or position of the ramp portion 110 from the drive shaft 242, but can be associated with any suitable portion of the ramp assembly 100, the movement or position of which corresponds to the position of the ramp portion.

As previously noted, when the ramp assembly 100 is in the stowed position, the ramp portion 110 extends inwardly from the support assembly 300 such that the ramp is disposed over the intermediate panel 130 and the inner panel 150. When so positioned, axis 352, about which the ramp portion 110 is connected to the support element 310, is in a raised position, as shown in FIGS. 6 and 10. In addition, the bearing element 320 is supportingly engaged by the support surface 332 of the cam element 330. Thus, the support element 310 and the cam element 330 cooperate to support the roadside end 120 of the ramp portion 110.

A first phase of the deployment motion begins as the drive assembly 230 rotates the support element 310 relative to the cam element 330. The rotation of the support element 310 moves axis 352 and, therefore, the roadside end 120 of the ramp portion 110 along an arcuate path. Still referring to FIGS. 6 and 10, the bearing element 320 moves due to the rotation of the ramp portion 110 and engages the cam surface 334 of the cam element 330. The bearing element 320 follows the cam surface 334, which combined with the downward movement of axis 352, begins to rotate the ramp portion 110 about the support assembly 300. During the first phase, the weight of the ramp portion 110 tends to rotate the ramp portion toward the stowed position. Thus, the bearing element 320 maintains contact with the cam surface 334.

The first phase of the deployment motion continues until the ramp portion 110 reaches the neutral position shown in FIGS. 7 and 11. In the neutral position, the center of gravity (CG) of the ramp portion 110 is located above the center of rotation of the ramp portion 110 so that the weight of the ramp portion does not impart a moment about axis 352, i.e., the weight of the ramp portion does not tend to rotate the ramp portion toward or away from the stowed position.

During a second phase of the deployment motion, the ramp portion 110 moves from the neutral position of FIGS. 7 and 11 toward a first deployed position, shown in FIGS. 8 and 13. Referring to FIGS. 13 and 14, the support element 310 continues to rotate, thereby continuing movement of the roadside

end 120 of the ramp portion 110 along an arcuate path. During the second phase of the deployment motion, the CG of the ramp portion 110 tends to rotate the ramp portion away from the stowed position. As a result, the bearing element 320 is supportingly engaged by the recess 312 formed in the support element 310. In the disclosed embodiment, the bearing element 320 disengages from the cam surface 334, although alternate embodiments are contemplated wherein the bearing element maintains engagement with the cam surface 334 through some or all of the second phase.

The support element 310 supports the bearing element 320 and, therefore, the ramp portion 110 during the second phase to prevent rotation of the ramp portion 110 about axis 352. Thus, the position of the ramp portion 110 is controlled by the rotational connection about axis 352 to the cam element 330 and the engagement of the bearing element 320 with the recess 312 formed in the support element 310. The second phase continues until the curbside end 118 of the ramp portion 110 contacts the alighting surface 90, as shown in FIG. 12.

A third phase of the deployment motion begins as the ramp portion 110 moves from the position in which the ramp portion 110 has made contact with the alighting surface 90, shown in FIG. 12, to the first deployed position shown in FIGS. 8 and 13, wherein the ramp portion and the intermediate panel form an angle of approximately 180°. During the third phase of the deployment motion, support element 310 continues to rotate, moving the hinged connection of the ramp portion 110 to the support element 310 and, therefore, the roadside end 120 of the ramp portion 110, along the arcuate path. As the roadside end 120 of the ramp portion 110 moves upward along the arcuate path, the curbside end 118 of the ramp portion 110 maintains contact with the alighting surface 90. With the curbside end 118 of the ramp portion 110 supported by the alighting surface 90, and the roadside end 120 of the ramp portion 110 supported by the connection of the ramp portion to the support element 310 about axis 352, rotation of the support element rotates the recess 312 of the support element away from the bearing element 320. Thus, the support element 310 disengages from the bearing element 320. The third deployment phase ends when the ramp portion 110 reaches the first deployed position, in which the ramp portion 110 forms a predetermined angle with the intermediate panel 130.

An optional fourth deployment motion moves the ramp portion from the first deployed position shown in FIGS. 8 and 13 to the second deployed position shown in FIGS. 9 and 14. During the fourth phase of the deployment motion, the support element 310 continues to rotate, moving the hinged connection of the ramp portion 110 to the support element 310 and, therefore, the roadside end 120 of the ramp portion 110, upward along the arcuate path. As the roadside end of the ramp portion 110 moves upward, the curbside end of the ramp portions maintains contact with the alighting surface 90. As a result, the slope of the ramp portion 110 increases. Raising the roadside end of the ramp portion also raises the curbside end of the intermediate panel 130, thereby decreasing the slope of the intermediate panel.

To move the ramp portion from the first or second deployed positions to the stowed position, the drive assembly 230 rotates the support element 310 in a clockwise direction about axis 350 (as shown in FIGS. 13 and 14). This rotation moves axis 352 and, therefore, the roadside end 120 of the ramp portion downward along an arcuate path. During the initial rotation, the ramp portion 110 is supported at the roadside end 120 by the rotational connection to the support element 310 and at the curbside end 118 by the alighting surface 90.

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As the support element **310** continues to rotate, the recess **312** formed in the support element engages the bearing element **320**. Further rotation of the support element **310** continues to move the recess **312** so that the engagement of the recess with the bearing element **320** drives the bearing element in a clockwise direction (as shown in FIGS. **11** and **12**). The movement of the bearing element **320** combined with the movement of axis **352** rotates the ramp portion **110** toward the neutral position. Throughout the movement of the ramp portion **110** from FIG. **12** to FIG. **11**, the CG of the ramp portion **110** is positioned curbside of axis **352** so that the weight of the ramp provides a moment that tends to maintain engagement of the bearing element **320** with the recess **312**.

As the ramp portion **110** passes through the neutral position of FIG. **11**, the CG of the ramp portion moves roadside of axis **352** so that the weight of the ramp portion tends to rotate the ramp portion about axis **352** toward the stowed position. As a result, the bearing element **320** engages the cam surface **334** of the cam element **330**. Engagement of the bearing element **320** with the cam surface **334** combines with the connection of the ramp portion **110** to the support element **310** about axis **352** controls the position of the ramp portion as the ramp portion continues to move from the neutral position toward the stowed position.

When the ramp portion **110** reaches the stowed position of FIG. **10**, the bearing element **320** contacts the support surface **332** of the cam element **330** so that the support surface supports the ramp portion. As shown in the embodiment of FIG. **10**, the recess **312** in the support element **310** also engages the bearing element **320** so that the bearing element is disposed between the recess and the support surface **332**. With the support element **310** and the cam element **330** engaging the bearing element **320** in this manner, the ramp portion is secured in the stowed position, and vibration of the ramp portion **110** in the stowed position is reduced.

As previously noted, conditions under which the ramp assembly **100** is deployed affect the deployment of the ramp assembly. For example, the height of the alighting surface affects the amount of ramp portion rotation required for the ramp portion **110** to first contact the alighting surface **90**. The alighting surface height also affects the amount of ramp portion rotation required beyond this initial contact to reach a predetermined angle between the ramp portion **110** and the intermediate panel **130**, as well as the slope of the ramp portion when the predetermined angle is reached. Because of these relationships, if the amount of ramp rotation required to reach a predetermined angle between the ramp portion and the intermediate panel is known, the height of the alighting surface can be approximated. This, in turn allows for various deployment positions to be determined, including the position in which the slope of the ramp portion is minimized, the position in which the angle between the intermediate panel and the vehicle floor is minimized, and various other positions.

The ramp assembly of the '544 publication is deployed with regard for only the angle of the intermediate panel to the ramp portion. Depending upon the height of the alighting surface, this method can result in undesirable deployment positions, particularly with respect to the angle of the intermediate panel relative to the vehicle floor. Unlike the ramp assembly disclosed in the '544 publication, the presently disclosed ramp assembly **100** is deployable in a manner that accommodates the slope of the ramp portion, angle of the intermediate panel relative to the vehicle floor, and the angle of the intermediate panel relative to the ramp portion.

One exemplary method for deploying the ramp assembly **100** addresses the advantage of minimizing the angle of the

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intermediate panel **130** relative to the vehicle floor, while at the same time limiting the slope of the ramp portion **110**. The method includes the step of moving the ramp portion **110** through the first phase, in which the ramp portion **110** moves from the stowed position (FIG. **10**) to the neutral position (FIG. **11**). As the ramp portion moves through this first phase, the support element **310** rotates axis **352** along an arcuate path, and the bearing element **320** follows the cam surface **334**.

The next step of the exemplary method is to move the ramp portion **110** from the neutral position (FIG. **11**) to a position in which the ramp portion first contacts the alighting surface (FIG. **12**). During this second phase, the support element **310** continues to rotate, thereby continuing movement of axis **352** along an arcuate path, while the bearing element **320** is supportingly engaged by the recess **312** formed in the support element **310**.

The next step of the exemplary method is to continue rotating the support element **310** until the ramp portion **110** reaches the first deployed position (FIG. **13**), in which the ramp portion forms an angle of approximately 180° with the intermediate panel **130**. During this third phase, the curbside end **118** of the ramp portion **110** maintains contact with the alighting surface, while the continued rotation of the support element **310** raises axis **352**, thereby increasing the slope of the ramp portion. Raising axis **352** also raises the curbside end **132** of the intermediate panel **130**, thereby decreasing the slope of the intermediate panel, which results in a decreased angle between the intermediate panel and the vehicle floor.

Although the first deployed position is described as being a position in which the ramp portion forms an angle of approximately 180° with the intermediate panel **130**, it will be appreciated that this position is exemplary and should not be considered limiting. In this regard, the first deployed position can be defined by any predetermined position of the ramp portion **110** relative to the intermediate panel **130**. In various non-limiting alternate embodiments, the ramp portion **110** and the intermediate panel **130** form an angle of approximately 170° , 190° , or any other angle in which the ramp portion and the intermediate panel cooperate to form a suitable transition surface from the inner panel **150** to the alighting surface **90**.

The next step of the exemplary method is to determine if the first deployed position is preferable to the second deployed position. If the first deployed position is preferable to the second deployed position, then the ramp assembly **100** remains in the first deployed position. If the second deployed position is preferable to the first deployed position, then the ramp portion **110** moves through the fourth deployment phase from the first deployed position to the second deployed position.

The slope of the ramp portion **110** and the intermediate panel **130** in the first deployed position is generally determined by the height of the alighting surface **90**. That is, for an alighting surface **90** of a particular height, a certain amount of rotation of the ramp portion **110** is required to move the ramp portion from the stowed position to the position wherein the ramp portion first contacts the alighting surface, i.e. through the first and second deployment phases. With the ramp portion **110** in contact with the alighting surface **90**, the height of the alighting surface further determines how much rotation of the ramp portion **110** is required to reach the first deployed position, in which the ramp portion and the intermediate panel are aligned. Other factors, such as road crown, can impact the amount of ramp portion rotation required to move the ramp assembly from the stowed position to the first deployed position, but such factors are typically negligible. Thus, an alighting surface of a particular height generally

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requires a unique amount of ramp portion rotation to move the ramp assembly from the stowed position to the first deployed position.

By measuring the rotation of the ramp portion **110** as it travels from the stowed position to the first deployed position, the height of the alighting surface can be approximated. This in turn allows for the slope of the ramp portion **110** and the intermediate panel **130** in the first deployed position to be approximated. Because the ramp portion **110** forms a known angle, e.g. 180° with the intermediate panel **130** in the first deployed position, the angle of the intermediate panel relative to the vehicle floor can also be approximated from the rotation necessary for the ramp portion **110** to travel from the stowed position to the first deployed position.

With the slope of the ramp portion **110** (ramp portion slope) and the angle of the intermediate panel **130** relative to the vehicle floor (intermediate panel angle) known in the first deployed position, the ramp portion slope and intermediate panel angle in the second deployed position can be determined. In one embodiment, the controller is programmed to calculate ramp portion slope and intermediate panel angle in the second deployed position based on the ramp portion slope and intermediate panel angle in the first deployed position. Alternatively, the controller can be programmed with the values of the ramp portion slope and intermediate panel angle in the second deployed position that correspond to a particular ramp portion slope and intermediate panel angle in the first deployed position.

With the respective ramp portion slopes and intermediate panel angles known for the first and second deployment positions, it can be determined whether or not to move the ramp assembly from the first deployed position to the second deployed position. If ramp portion slope and intermediate panel angle of the first deployed position are preferable to those of the second deployed position, then the ramp assembly remains in the first deployed position. If the ramp portion slope and intermediate panel angle of the second deployed position are preferable to those of the first deployed position, the ramp assembly travels through the optional fourth deployment phase from the first deployed position to the second deployed position.

In another exemplary method, the position of the ramp portion **110** is sensed when the ramp portion initially contacts the alighting surface **90** (FIG. 12) rather than in the first deployed position (FIG. 13). As previously noted, when the ramp portion **110** initially contacts the alighting surface **90**, the bearing element **320** is engaged with the recess **312** of the support element **310**. Further movement away from the stowed position disengages the bearing element **320** from the recess **312**. It is therefore possible to detect when the ramp portion **110** has first contacted the alighting surface **90** by sensing when the bearing element **320** disengages from the recess **312**. In one contemplated embodiment, a sensor, such as a magnetic or optical sensor, senses the position of the bearing element **320** relative to the recess **312**. In another contemplated embodiment, a sensor is positioned on the ramp portion **110** to directly sense contact with the alighting surface **90**. In yet another contemplated embodiment, the load on the motor **240** is detected during the deployment motion. Because the ramp portion **110** goes from being supported by the bearing element **320** to being supported by the alighting surface when the ramp portion initially contacts the alighting surface, the load on the motor **240** changes. By detecting when this change occurs, the initial contact of the ramp portion **110** to the alighting surface **90** can be determined.

When the ramp portion **110** makes initial contact with the alighting surface **90**, the height of the alighting surface can be

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approximated. As previously discussed, the corresponding ramp portion slope and intermediate panel angle can then be determined. This in turn allows for the respective ramp portion slopes and intermediate panel angles known for the first and second deployment positions to be determined, thereby enabling a determination of which deployment position is preferable. The ramp assembly then completes the deployment movement by moving the ramp portion to the preferred deployed position.

In one embodiment of the disclosed method, the deployment of the ramp assembly **100** is controlled by the operator. That is, the operator activates the drive assembly **230** via the controller **250** to deploy ramp assembly **100** until the ramp portion **110** has reached the first deployment position. During the deployment motion, the sensor **380** sends signals to the controller **250** indicating the position of the ramp portion **110** relative to the intermediate panel **130**. When the controller **250** receives a signal from the sensor **380** indicating that the ramp assembly **100** has reached the first deployed position, i.e., the ramp portion **110** and the intermediate panel **130** form an angle of approximately 180° , the controller **250** stops deployment of the ramp assembly **110**. The operator can then (1) leave the ramp assembly **100** in the first deployed position if the operator determines the first deployed position to be preferable to the second deployed position, or (2) activate the drive assembly **230** via the controller **250** to move the ramp assembly from the first deployment position to the second deployment position. In this manner, the operator decides whether or not it is desirable to increase the slope of the ramp portion **110** in order to decrease the angle of the intermediate floor **130** relative to the vehicle floor.

In a second contemplated embodiment, the controller **250** controls the drive assembly **230** to deploy the ramp assembly **100** according to the disclosed method. The controller **250** is operatively connected to the first sensor **380**, which senses the angle formed by the ramp portion **110** and the intermediate panel **130**, and to the second sensor **390**, which senses the travel of the ramp portion. When the controller **250** receives a signal from the first sensor **380** that the ramp assembly is in the first deployed position, the controller determines the ramp portion slope and intermediate panel angle according to the signals received from the first and second sensors **380** and **390**. Based on the ramp portion slope and the intermediate panel angle, the controller **250**, either (1) leaves the ramp assembly **100** in the first deployed position if the first deployed position is preferable to the second deployed position, or (2) controls the drive assembly **230** to move the ramp assembly from the first deployed position to the second deployed position.

While illustrative embodiments have been illustrated and described, it will be appreciated that various changes can be made therein without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention.

The invention claimed is:

1. A method of deploying a ramp assembly to provide a transition surface between a vehicle floor and an alighting surface, the ramp assembly being moveable between a stowed position, a first deployed position, and a second deployed position, the ramp assembly having a ramp portion coupled for rotational movement about a first end of the ramp portion and a panel having a first end and a second end, the panel being rotatable about the first end of the panel, the method comprising the steps of:

(a) rotating the ramp portion from the stowed position until the ramp portion contacts the alighting surface, the ramp portion being disengaged from the panel during at least

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- a part of the ramp portion rotation prior to the ramp portion contacting the alighting surface;
- (b) rotating the ramp portion until the ramp assembly reaches the first deployed position, wherein the ramp portion forms a predetermined angle with the panel in the first deployed position, the first deployed position being between the stowed position and the second deployed position; and
- (c) selectively raising the first end of the ramp portion to the second deployed position, wherein raising the first end of the ramp portion engages the ramp portion with the panel to elevate the second end of the panel.
2. The method of claim 1, wherein the predetermined angle is in the range of 170° to 190°.
3. The method of claim 2, wherein the predetermined angle is approximately 180°.
4. The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of receiving a first signal from a first sensor, the first sensor sensing an angle formed by the ramp portion and the panel.
5. The method of claim 4, further comprising the step of receiving a second signal from a second sensor, the second sensor sensing rotation of the ramp portion.
6. The method of claim 5, further comprising the step of determining a first deployment position parameter from the first and second signals.
7. The method of claim 6, further comprising the step of determining a second deployment position parameter from the first deployment position parameter.
8. The method of claim 7, further comprising the step of comparing the first deployment position parameter to the second deployment position parameter.
9. The method of claim 7, wherein the first deployment position parameter is a first slope of the ramp portion in the first deployment position.
10. The method of claim 9, wherein the second deployment position parameter is a second slope of the ramp portion in the second deployment position.
11. The method of claim 7, wherein the first deployment position parameter is a first angle formed by the panel and the vehicle floor in the first deployment position.
12. The method of claim 9, wherein the second deployment position parameter is a second angle formed by the panel and the vehicle floor in the second deployment position.

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13. A method of deploying a ramp assembly to provide a transition surface between a vehicle floor and an alighting surface, the ramp assembly being moveable between a stowed position, a first deployed position, and a second deployed position, the ramp assembly having a ramp portion coupled for rotational movement and a panel rotatable about a first end, the ramp portion supportingly engaging a second end of the panel to elevate the second end of the panel as the ramp portion moves toward the second deployed position, the method comprising the steps of:
- (a) rotating the ramp portion until the ramp portion contacts the alighting surface;
- (b) receiving a first signal from a first sensor when the ramp portion contacts the alighting surface, the first sensor sensing rotation of the ramp portion;
- (c) determining the first deployed position and the second deployed position from the first signal;
- (d) rotating the ramp portion to the first deployed position; and
- (e) selectively rotating the ramp portion to the second deployed position.
14. The method of claim 13, further comprising the step of determining an angle formed by the ramp portion and the panel when the ramp portion first contacts the alighting surface.
15. The method of claim 14, further comprising the step of determining the angle formed by the ramp portion and the panel when the ramp portion is in the first deployed position.
16. The method of claim 15, further comprising the step of determining the angle formed by the ramp portion and the panel when the ramp portion is in the second deployed position.
17. The method of claim 13, further comprising the step of determining a slope of the ramp portion when the ramp portion first contacts the alighting surface.
18. The method of claim 17, further comprising the step of determining the slope of the ramp portion when the ramp portion is in the first deployed position.
19. The method of claim 18, further comprising the step of determining the slope of the ramp portion when the ramp portion is in the second deployed position.

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